PROFESSOR

BERNICE SUMMERFIELD

PARALLEL LIVES

A TRILOGY OF NOVELLAS FEATURING NEW STORIES BY

REBECCA LEVENE
STEWART SHEARGOLD &
DAVE STONE

A New Trilogy by
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Three brand-new novellas…

PARALLEL LIVES

A trilogy of novellas featuring new stories by
REBECCA LEVENE
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DAVE STONE

The Collection has lost one of its own. Someone who made a mistake once, and has never been forgiven for it. Someone whose hard work and need to make amends has been taken for granted. Someone who doesn't fit in.

Clarissa Jones has been head of administration at the Braxiatel Collection for many years. Enough time to really know her way around the place – its security, its weaknesses, its secrets. Knowledge, in fact, of great value to any of the neighbouring powers.

So its bad news for everyone when she disappears.

The Collection has lost one of its own. Unless Clarissa has taken others with her.

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Welcome to the Braxiatel Collection
Located on the planetoid KS-159, our collection of everything is no longer the austere, scary, by-invitation-only sort of place. Now we've opened our doors to students and academics from all across the cosmos.

Irving **Braxiatel** is our founder suave and mysterious, and something of a sneaky devil. You're more likely to bump in to **Bernice Summerfield,** our Professor of Archaeology (and, unofficially, of Weird Adventures). She says she's working on her latest book, and we believe her. Benny's half-Killoran son **Peter** is now almost five – doesn't time fly? His all-Killoran dad, **Adrian Wall,** is construction manager at the Collection. He and Bernice aren't an item or anything, though. They never were. Look, it's complicated. Well-meaning rascal Jason **Kane** is Benny's current beau – they even used to be married. **Bev Tarrant** is P.A. to Mr Braxiatel. Some people say she used to be an art thief, but we pay no heed to such gossip. Benny also has a personal assistant – **Joseph** who is one of our senior AIs, and linked to the Collection's main systems.

We hope you survive your stay.

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Adrian Salmon

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Over 300,000 Bernice Summerfield adventures sold since 1992!

Three brand-new adventures featuring Bernice Summerfield (sometime adventurer, even-less-time academic) and her extended family.

I can look after my son perfectly well, thank you, Clarissa. And if I need any help, well, he's got Adrian and Jason, hasn't he?

Its bad news for everyone when Clarissa Jones disappears.

Braxiatel is quick to dispatch the troops to find Ms Jones and bring her home. Bernice is dispatched to Atwalla 3, where women are not seen, let alone heard. Jason Kane gets caught up with wild and frankly ridiculous – pirates and girl bands. And, finally picking up Ms Jones's trail, Bev Tarrant and Adrian Wall only uncover their own darkest secrets.'.

The stories are:

The Serpent's Tooth
by Rebecca Levene
Hiding Places
by Stewart Sheargold
Jason and the Pirates
by Dave Stone

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The Braxiatel Collection

'Collection of what?' is an invalid question. Arguably the finest and most extensive in the known universe, it is a collection of everything. The various departments of the Braxiatel Collection house antique artefacts, literature, playscripts, recordings of events and people and performances, geological specimens, software and hardware from days gone by… A permanent home for the Braxiatel Collection is the planetoid formerly designated KS-159 – now itself known as the Braxiatel Collection. Once a very secure, by-invitation-only sort of place, since being liberated from Occupation by the Fifth Axis, the Collection has had a change of policy. Now it has opened its doors to students and academics.

The staff

Fabulously rich, **Irving Braxiatel** is Renaissance Man for the new era. He is well read, extremely learned, an expert in almost everything, though in some matters he lacks practical experience. He does have a tendency to miss the details while looking at the big picture – details like how people actually feel about things, for example. He has built up his collection over the years probably over the centuries. But how old he really is, whether or not he actually ever ages, is not something that it is polite to discuss.

Professor Bernice Summerfield is a guest of Irving Braxiatel. She is currently working on a collection of papers to follow her best-selling coffee-table archaeology book Down Among The Dead Men (published originally in 2466, which is odd given it is now 2606). Her half-Killoran son, **Peter,** is five. He's fast growing up into a right little tearaway. Probably gets that from his mother. **Wolsey** is Benny's venerable tabby tomcat, whose mousing days are sadly long past. **Joseph** (so-called for historical and sentimental reasons) is Benny's personal digital assistant. He is an AI computer system linked to the Braxiatel Collection's main scheduling systems, and he's roughly the size of a football. Personality-wise (and again for historical/romantic reasons) Joseph has been programmed to be 'dry' and literal. Not surprisingly, he spends most of his time switched off.

Jason Kane is Benny's ex-husband: wily, technically able, and not half the scoundrel most people think. In fact, when he's not helping out in the management of the Collection (all a bit of a mess since Clarissa Jones, er, vacated), he's got a flourishing career on the side as an author and academic. Of a sort, anyway.

Clarissa Jones is in charge of Administration – though there are many who can't understand why she's still on the Collection at all.

During the Occupation, she was romantically involved with one of the Fifth Axis officers – the one who tortured Bev. But Braxiatel insisted Ms Jones get her job back. This includes overseeing the reconstruction work and the tending of the garden and grounds. She is a lady of uncertain age, is six feet tall and of an unspecified background. If it seems she has something to hide, it is probably because she does. She wears horn-rimmed glasses on a chain round her neck and woe betide you if she has cause to put them on…

Bev Tarrant is Brax's PA – an odd role for a former art thief, whose role before the Occupation was 'acquiring' new items for Brax. She has chestnut hair, and you can see the scars from when she was tortured by the Fifth Axis. She gave nothing away.

Adrian Wall is the construction manager. He is in charge of all the ongoing work on the Collection, and reports to Ms Jones. Like most of his workforce, Wall is a Killoran – a seven-foot-tall cross between an ape and an upright wolf complete with fangs, snout and claws. He is Peter's father – though (for reasons too complex to go into right now) he and Benny were never 'together'.

Hass is the intergalactically renowned gardener on the Collection. A Martian, he can be seen lumbering around in his cold-suit, though he keeps himself to himself, doesn't say a lot, and doesn't seem at all happy to be here. It's best just to keep out of his way.

We hope your time on the Collection is useful. Enjoy your stay.

Parallel Lives (I)

By Simon Guerrier

Once upon a time, there was a woman who fell in love with a man.

The man was a soldier, an officer with an occupying force. His army bullied, tortured and killed the woman's friends, as well as people she'd never even met. Still she loved him.

Oh, she tried to change him, tried to appeal to him, tried to ignore what he did. When the rebellion came, she even tried to save him.

He wouldn't listen to her.

After he was dead, the woman tried to carry on as before. She worked to repair the damage he had done, to help his victims rebuild their lives. Some understood what she had done for them, what she had been through. They had all been hurt, somehow. They would work to make things better.

But not everyone thought like that.

Clarissa Jones was woken three minutes before her alarm by a claw grabbing at her toes. She rolled over, curling up into the duvet, pulling her feet from its grip.

The owner of the claw squealed with laughter. She heard him pad round the side of the bed, and then heard his breathing, up close. She opened one eye. Yes, his hairy little face was pressed up to hers.

'I suppose you want breakfast,' she said, sleepily. Peter Summerfield grinned at her. Despite everything, Clarissa grinned back.

'Broken,' he said, frowning at her. The same, serious expression he did when he was being told off. Or building something.

'What's broken, Peter?' she asked, sitting up and reaching for her gown. The muscles in her arm creaked in protest.

'Wasn't me!' he said, shaking his head.

'Well, let's see, shall we?'

She hauled herself out of bed, the wintry cold cutting through her. The heating must be on the blink again, she thought. She'd have a word with Adrian, see what he could do.

Peter grabbed her hand, tugging at her to follow him. She resisted, slipping her feet into slippers before she let him drag her off. Nearly six, and he was full of strength and energy. She envied him that, remembering far-off days when she too had bounced out of bed. Days when everything had been easy and safe.

There was a breeze blowing in the living room, swirling the curtains. Peter looked up at her. 'Wasn't me!' he said again.

Clarissa patted his paw. ‘No, of course not,’ she said. ‘You stay here.’

There was broken glass on the floor under the curtain. She stepped carefully around it. No, Peter hadn’t done this. Someone had thrown a pebble through her window. Part of the festivities last night.

Peter watched her expectantly. She sighed.

‘Let’s fix your breakfast and then I’ll clear this up,’ she said.

‘I’ll send Adrian over,’ said Irving Braxiatel, later that morning. ‘It won’t take him a moment, I’m sure.’

‘That’s hardly the point,’ Clarissa replied.

They were in Irving’s office, at the heart of the Mansionhouse, the walls inlaid marble, the floor flagged with stone. An ornate looking-glass hung above the mantlepiece – a new addition to the room. She’d never thought him one for vanity. Not that sort of vanity, anyway.

‘No? Well, I’m sorry, Clarissa, but we do have other concerns. You know what the Draconians are saying?’

‘No. But Irving –’

‘More than a century ago, this planetoid sat within their territory. They’re now claiming it still is in their territory, under some absurd caveat about war reparations. Then there’s this jumped-up Martian asking awkward questions about some of our artefacts –’

‘Irving, they attacked me. And when I had Peter with me. The Draconians won’t come to anything. Trust me on that.’

Braxiatel leaned forward over his mahogany writing desk. He had still not offered Clarissa a chair – another sign he didn’t want to prolong this. Though she towered over him, it just made her feel awkward and silly. She was diligent and organised, and he just made her feel like she was flapping.

‘I was forgetting you had your own perspective on matters to come,’ he said quietly. His expression changed, like he’d made up his mind about something. ‘You said there was graffiti?’

‘Yes. All over my front door.’

‘And did Peter see it?’

‘Of course he saw it!’ She shrugged. ‘They didn’t dot the “i”, though, so he thought it said “tractor”. But he could have been hurt, Irving.’

‘Yes. I’ll have Bev look over the security footage, and see what’s to be learnt. The celebrations are meant to be that – celebrations that the Occupation is over. Not an excuse to settle old scores.’ He looked up at her. Perhaps she had flinched. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘That sounded like –’

‘Like there are old scores to be settled. It’s been nearly two years, Irving, and they still won’t forgive me.’

‘They will, Clarissa. But it’s difficult, it takes time. I’ll look into this. But maybe it’s best if Peter stays with his father until Bernice gets

back.'

Clarissa felt herself nodding. Of course that was the sensible thing to do, for Peter's sake.

She wanted to say, though, that Peter needed attention when he wasn't at school. Adrian was too busy – working on whatever new something Irving had given him. Jason could only be trusted to lead Peter astray. Hass got fidgety if left babysitting for more than an hour. No, she was the best person to look after the boy when Bernice was away. As she too often was. Clarissa was the only constant in Peter's life, and she knew what he'd grow up to be without her.

She didn't say anything of that, though. She knew how it would sound.

'Yes,' she said.

'Good!' said Irving, clapping his hands together. He unwittingly glanced at the screen beside him. 'Now if there's not anything else…'

'There is something,' she said. 'Ronan McGinley.'

Irving's eyes narrowed. 'Who?'

'Ronan,' she said. 'He was Professor of twenty-first-century literature. Last year. We were…' She had to think of the right word. 'We were friends.'

Irving gazed up at the ceiling, at the perfect replica of the Supremacy of Venus.

'Yes,' he said at length. 'Yes, I think I remember. Rough diamond, as it turned out, isn't that right?' She didn't answer. 'I found him something else to do. For his sake, of course. But I don't think he'll be coming back here. What was it you wanted from him?'

Clarissa sighed. 'Just to talk. He understood… Well, he made things easier.' Irving nodded, sadly. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'But Bernice is due back from Etheria in a couple of days. I'm sure she'll be happy to listen to you.'

'Yes, of course,' she said. 'Thank you, Irving.'

'No bother at all.'

Clarissa spent the rest of the day making her mind up. She collected Peter from school, made him his tea, and listened to what he'd been up to. He took delight in almost everything, and all she needed to do was let him talk. Jason appeared later in the evening – later than he'd promised – to collect him.

'Thanks for all this,' he said, clutching Peter's various possessions. 'Had some writing to do, and you know how it is with him…'

'He needs care and attention,' she replied.

'Yeah, that's it,' said Jason. 'Come on then, you. Home time.'

Peter ran to the door, then stopped and turned back. He gazed up at Clarissa, his eyes wide. Sometimes his instinct was uncanny. Did he

know what she'd decided?

'Thank,' he said, carefully. 'You for. Having me.'

'You're very welcome,' she said. 'It's been my pleasure.'

She waited an hour after they were gone, just to be sure that they'd not forgotten anything, that they wouldn't be back. Then she started packing.

The Serpent's Tooth

Rebecca Levene

Chapter One

Brax told her it was an extremely bad idea. Well, what did he know? He thought omitting to floss her teeth every day was a bad idea too. Besides, what choice did she have?

'At least have the operation,' Braxiatel said. 'They can't discover you're not a man if you really are one.'

'What a great idea!' Bernice replied brightly and utterly insincerely. 'Because me walking around in a man's body worked out so well for me the last time.' She shook her head. 'No, a disguise will be fine. It's not as if I'm intending on being there for very long. Or on getting intimate enough with anyone for them to find out.' She paused, thoughtfully. 'Well, not unless they're *extremely* attractive and buy me at least two dinners with wine.'

'Bernice –' Braxiatel began warningly.

She held up her hand. 'Joking, Brax. Just look after Peter for me, and don't go spoiling him like you usually do and everything will be fine.'

Braxiatel studied her closely, seeming to sense something in her face, some unease or discomfort, that she wasn't aware she was showing. 'You don't need to go at all, Bernice.'

'Yes I do. I need to find Clarissa, you know that, and this is the last place we've heard she went to. Besides, it's going to be a piece of cake.' And then, grinning, she added, 'What can possibly go wrong?'

Braxiatel shuddered, as she'd known he would, and Bernice felt a lot better. Let him worry for her – she'd never been to the Fallan Nebula before, and she was determined to enjoy herself, disguise and all.

Brax came to see her off, pausing outside the shuttle doors to examine her head to toe. His already thin mouth tensed, leaving him looking lipless, like a disapproving lizard. 'Bernice, I really think –'

Bernice shook her head. 'It's Bernhart now.' She adjusted her britches self-consciously.

His eyes scanned her again, and his expression cleared slightly. 'I must say, it is very convincing. How exactly have you..?'

Bernice looked down at herself, a strange, foreshortened view of broad legs, narrow hips, flat chest – well, no change there – and frontal bulge. 'Let's just say prosthetics and leave it at that.' She shifted her bag slightly over her shoulder, then winced. 'Although, if this level of chafing keeps up, the trip could be rather less enjoyable than I was hoping.'

Braxiatel leaned back a little and waved his hand in a *please god don't tell me any more* sort of gesture. 'Just be careful, that's all I ask.'

‘Aren’t I always?’

Braxiatel didn’t dignify that with an answer, just stood, face as unreadable as an Easter Island statue’s, as she climbed aboard the shuttle and slammed the door behind her.

The journey took two weeks. The Nebula was far away, not just from the Collection but from anywhere, on a spiral arm that never got visited very much or, Bernice was beginning to discover, written about much either.

She spent the journey growing used to her disguise, getting comfortable with it, never allowing herself to step out of character even though there was no one else around to witness any lapses. Jokes to Braxiatel aside, she knew that her life might depend on it. In fact she became more certain of it, the more of the limited amount of literature concerning Atwalla 3 she read.

The whole region was under cultural quarantine, orders of the Military Educational Complex of the Spartan System. The Atwallan civilisation had achieved space travel, but nothing which could cross galactic distances, so its political system and worldview were pleasingly parochial. The MEC regarded it as an unparalleled opportunity for some participant observation of a culture less jaded by knowledge than their own, and they were buggered if they’d let scholars from anywhere else in the galaxy culturally contaminate the place and mess up their little experiment. One day, they’d publish the mother of all papers about it, but in the meantime, information was thin on the ground.

Bernice would never have been allowed near the Nebula if she’d tried for a legal visa, not with her academic credentials. Lucky, then, that she’d found a nice little illegal back door and was planning on exploiting it.

The Nebula was relatively peaceful, but it was the sort of peace a dictatorship enforced – uneasy. Atwalla 3 was the centre of power in the region, home to a humanoid race who were the most technologically advanced in the vicinity.

Although ‘advanced’ wasn’t a word that Bernice would use to describe them in other respects. It wouldn’t be entirely accurate to say that women were second-class citizens there. It would be more accurate to say that they weren’t citizens at all. Hence, of course, the disguise.

The place seemed pretty backward in a number of other ways too, some form of techno-medieval dictatorship ruled over with absolute power by a hereditary Emperor. There were public executions. Economic and social inequality were facts of everyday life, not just tolerated but actively encouraged by the ruling elite. Starvation and

disease, a life expectancy at least thirty years lower than the population was biologically capable of, no freedom of speech, no freedom of expression, no freedom of association.

Bernice was beginning to see why the MEC were keeping the place to themselves. It sounded *great.* Picking up Clarissa's trail might just end up as a secondary objective. Bernice could sense a definite paper in this place, maybe even a book. She couldn't wait to get there.

* * *

And then she was, and she wasn't so sure any more. It was always jarring, feeling the soil of an alien planet beneath her feet, being caught in the embrace of an alien atmosphere. More so since she'd been living in the rarefied nowhere, nowhen of the Collection. There was a sense of unreality about it, as if everything around her were just a mirage, a green-screen projection that she was acting a part against. Or as if *she* were the projection, not there in any way that actually mattered.

Then it all snapped into focus, as it always did, the sights, the sounds, the smells, the solidity of it inescapable. I'm *here,* she thought.

She took a moment to shift the prosthetic bulge in her britches to a marginally less intrusive position, and walked out into the mess of it all. The shuttle port where she'd chosen to land was a tiny affair, a place where small-time traders brought their wares, and right next to it was the bazaar where they sold them. So many people, she thought, and not a one of them female.

If there'd been any more testosterone in the air she wouldn't have needed the prosthesis, she'd have started spontaneously changing gender, like those butchers in twentieth-century Earth who only had boys because of all the hormones they pumped into the meat they sold.

You don't realise how necessary women are to the balance of things till they aren't around any more. An aura of violence, of knife-edge aggression held in check by social sanctions that might not be quite strong enough, hung over the whole place. Everywhere, men were shouting, puffing out their chests, pushing against each other, arms raised, scowling, or smiling so hard it was really a sneer.

They were, Bernice guessed, haggling over wares, laying them out, weapons, ship parts, food from other worlds. Haggling over women too, Bernice realised, as she overheard a conversation between two men, one barely old enough to shave, the other almost too old to walk, and realised that the 'property' whose price they were negotiating was the younger man's sister. Bernice became aware that her hand had clenched into a fist at her side and very carefully unclenched it, uncurling a finger at a time. Unconscious aggressive cues weren't the thing to be giving out here.

She would have liked to take a moment to stand still, just absorb it all. But this wasn't a place for immobility either. Like a twig carried in a current too strong to resist, she felt herself swept along past the brightly coloured stalls and out. There, suddenly, the noise blinked out. The streets outside were a warren, the buildings modern, plascrete and memory plastic, but subdued, grey and ochre and black, shuttered so that no windows looked out onto the streets, as if they were turning their backs on the world outside their doors. She was fascinated to see that each door had two separate knockers. One for the men, one for the women. And then there was the shape of the houses, leaning over narrow streets, terribly impractical, and unnecessary too when you had materials like memory plastic to work with. They'd built their new houses over the ghosts of their old ones, Bernice realised, laid out new streets on the corpses of the old, generation after generation.

This isn't a place that wants to change, she thought. *But that's fine – I'm not here to change it.*

It didn't take her long to track down the contact she'd established before she came here, the man who claimed to have some information about Clarissa. He seemed surprised to see her, though she introduced herself as Bernhart, a friend of Bernice's who was following up leads for her.

'Not here any more,' the man said, shrugging, his eyes cowering behind the wrinkled folds of his face like caged animals.

'Well, where then?' Bernice asked. She would deliberately forgo courtesy or tact, trying to sound as male as possible, uncaring of the niceties of social interaction.

The man frowned, and for a moment she thought she'd overdone it, but he was just thinking. He pointed behind her. 'The Old Forest,' he said. 'Heard she might have headed there.' His caged eyes wandered away from her and back to the electro-paper news-sheet he'd been reading. She saw that one of the stories concerned the Emperor's eldest daughter. All the article showed of her was a dark form, so bundled in robes it was unclear if it was even human.

'Thanks,' she said to the top of his head, and turned back to the door.

She'd nearly shut it behind her when she heard him shift, his chair scraping as he stood up. She looked back at him.

He looked at her a long time before speaking. 'Old Forest… You'd better be careful,' he said eventually. 'There's things there… It isn't safe.'

Bernice frowned. 'What sorts of things?'

He looked away again, as if he felt he'd already said enough.

‘Monsters.’

‘Oh,’ Bernice said. ‘Those sorts of things.’

The Role of the Dystopian Woodland Archetype in *Myths of Fear and Horror*. This, Bernice thought, was a paper that was just waiting to be written. And as soon as she’d got over the abject fear and horror that this particular woodland was instilling in her, she’d get right out there and write it.

The place was *terrifying*. The trees were huge, and very old, drifts of dead grey leaves hanging down from their branches like tattered shrouds. The place was full of shadows, the sun held at bay high above Bernice in the canopy which contained the only life in the forest. Down at Bernice’s level, there was only a weak, watery blue-green haze, a sickly shade of light that didn’t really illuminate anything, just lent every branch and bush around her a spectral, ominous glow.

She’d brought along a machete, expecting to have to hack her way through dense undergrowth, but the ground around her was bare and brown, deformed by the lack of light. The path opened up clear ahead of her, stretching off to be lost in the gloom. It looked, she thought, very much the sort of path that would end in a cottage made of confectionery and an old woman with a suspicious enthusiasm for dinner.

It was hard to imagine exactly why Clarissa, or indeed anyone, would want to come down here. Bernice found herself going over her informant’s words again, mentally reviewing and studying the nuances of his tone and actions as she’d failed to do at the time. She’d thought he seemed surprised to see her, but perhaps the expression that had flickered briefly across his face had been guilt, not shock.

He’d told Bernice that Clarissa had left, that she’d come here. Perhaps he’d been told to say that. And then, she remembered this very vividly, he’d paused – and then told her that this place was dangerous.

Someone paid him to send me here to die. And he felt just guilty enough to try to warn me.

And, somehow, Bernice was suddenly certain that her death was already with her, stalking her. Shivering suddenly despite the clammy warmth of the air, Bernice carefully drew out her machete, wincing at the metallic scraping sound it made as she pulled it from its sheath. Then, very quickly, she turned around.

Standing about ten paces behind her was what could only be described as a dragon.

In the green light, its scales were a dirty olive colour, but there were darker patches which she thought might have been red. They might

have been blood.

The thing couldn't have been less than seventy feet from snout to tail. Its eyes, slitted like a cat's, gazed at her with far too much intelligence. When it yawned, displaying a mouthful of teeth as sharp as razors and as long as her arm, the expression almost looked like a mocking smile.

Then its mouth opened wider still, and it was only because Bernice was expecting it that she was able to dive out of the way. The gout of fire singed her all the same, reducing the hairs on her arms to cinders and scorching a raw line of blisters across the side of her face she didn't turn away quite fast enough.

As soon as it realised that it had missed her, it moved again, more quickly than she would have believed possible for a thing that size, trying to finish with its teeth what it had started with its flame.

Somewhere, vaguely in the background where she couldn't possibly afford to pay attention to them, Bernice thought she might have heard voices. And something that looked like a steel dart embedded itself in the scales beside her. It didn't slow the creature even for a second. The head, teeth oily and gleaming in the pale light, sheered towards her.

In one of those decisions which gets made before it's even thought, Bernice dived forward, towards the thing – though every nerve in her body was screaming at her to do the opposite – in under the reach of its jaws. She heard them snap shut somewhere just behind her head with an almost musical ringing sound. The creature's neck was exposed in front of her and she slashed the machete across it as hard as she could, putting her shoulder as well as her arm into the motion.

The blade bounced harmlessly off, slicing her cheek on the backswing. In Bernice's moment of shock the creature moved again, whipping its tail around towards her, the tail which she now saw was covered with barbs almost as sharp as its teeth. She saw the corner of its eye, gleaming evilly at her, as it swung its head back round. A second more, and she'd be trapped.

And, just for a second, the double motion lifted its belly from the ground and she saw a patch where the scales seemed to give way to skin. It shone, fish-belly white in the darkness, maybe a foot wide.

Bernice leapt forward, arms stretched out in front of her, machete held like a spear between them. She put all her weight into it, knowing that the landing was going to hurt like hell. Already, the white, scale-less patch was disappearing back under the creature's body as it completed the manoeuvre that would rip Bernice apart.

There was only an inch of white still showing when Bernice completed her dive and the machete met the creature's skin and sunk straight in. The impact jarred agonisingly up her arms, wrenching her shoulder so hard she thought it might have been dislocated. Her face,

moving as fast as she'd been able to throw herself, scraped along the creatures scales, skinning her as efficiently as with a knife.

And the creature let out a scream of pain, high-pitched and ululating, like nothing she had ever heard before. Then it began its death throes, and Bernice realised that she had miraculously survived its attack only to face dying beneath its convulsing bulk. The tail flailed from side to side, spikes slamming into the ground, into the creature's own back – and then straight for Bernice's head.

Before she had time to move, something seized her arm and pulled. The tail passed so close she could feel the breeze of its passage ruffling her hair. Bernice let out her own scream of agony, drowned beneath the dragon's roars, as her already tender shoulder was wrenched back and back, but whatever was pulling her didn't let up and a moment later she was out of reach of the great creature's motions and all she could see was one of its eyes, glassy with pain, glaring back at her with awful accusation, and then everything started to look kind of grey and hazy. And then it was all just black.

When she came round, it was to find a good-looking young man trying to undo her shirt. It took her about two seconds to work out that this was probably a very bad idea. As soon as she did, she sat bolt upright, clutching her arm over what would have been revealed if he'd undone one more button.

'Erm, what exactly are you doing?' she asked, in a voice that was still high-pitched despite the voice-modulating implant she'd put in back at the Collection.

The young man frowned at her. He really was very good-looking, cornflower-blue eyes above cheekbones you could slice cheese with. 'I beg your pardon sir, I thought the beast might have injured you.'

'Only my pride,' Bernice said, struggling to her feet. There were four other men surrounding her in a concerned huddle, ranging in age from twenty – the man who'd been addressing her – to a grizzled fifty-something whose hair was more grey than black, tightly curled above a face that looked as if it had survived a large number of fights, but lost quite a few of them. As soon as she rose, they all executed low, courtly bows. Bernice offered a far less elegant one of her own in return.

'There's no reason your pride should have suffered,' the oldest man said. 'You did what it was said no man born of woman could do – slew the Great Beast of Wendt.'

Bernice glanced over to the corpse of the creature that had attacked her, already attracting the attention of insects and carrion birds. Dead, it looked smaller, almost harmless. She felt a stab of guilt. She'd met her first real-life dragon and what had she done? 'I suppose I did slay

it. I didn't mean to.'

The older man smiled. 'Fear not, you haven't offended us. The task we'd been set seemed impossible, we all despaired – and then you came, and with a knife no bigger than a needle you completed our quest for us. We're grateful, more grateful than you can know.' He bowed again, then straightened to look her in the eye. Bernice found that she liked him. There was something direct and uncomplicated in his gaze. 'I am Knight Dreash,' he said. 'These others are Knight Arbour' – the young blond – 'Knight Wishveel' – a bland-looking man with curiously wide-set eyes – 'And Knight Sloravian' – a slight man with skin the colour of polished wood.

Bernice smiled round at them. 'Well, you saved my life too, so I'd say it's worked out pretty well all round.' She saw their puzzled frowns and belatedly added, 'Oh, and I'm Bernhart.'

'Knight Bernhart, we're honoured,' Dreash said, bowing yet again. It was a wonder he didn't put something out, carrying on like that.

'So, well, I suppose I'd best be on my way,' Bernice said. She glanced suddenly at the corpse of the dragon. 'Unless I'm expected to clear that up.'

'We will of course, be taking the skull as a trophy, and proof of our – or rather your – success,' Arbour said. 'But you can't go.'

Bernice, who had already taken a step away from them, looked up to find that the ring of men had closed around her. And suddenly their expressions looked closed, unreadable. She noticed, for the first time, that they were wearing reinforced kevlar suits, primitive blasters hanging from their belts and neo-steel double blades slung across their backs. It occurred to her that the title of knight was more than an honorary one.

She swallowed. 'Why not?'

Sloravian smiled. His teeth were almost as sharp as the dragon's. 'You killed the beast. You completed the third of our four quests. We were told that you'd join us – without you we'll never accomplish our final task.'

'You were told I'd join you?' Bernice asked, trying to rein in the suspicion in her voice. 'Who told you?'

'The oracle,' Wishveel said. 'It was very clear.'

Bernice relaxed a little. This sounded less threatening, less like it was part of Clarissa or one of her associates setting Bernice up. 'What exactly did this oracle say about me specifically?'

'She said that four would be five,' Wishveel said eagerly, his wide-set eyes gleaming with a slightly crazy light. 'She said that brown would overthrow green. She said that strangers would know more than friends, and that when the moon was in its fourth quarter the grass would grow backwards.'

‘Right,’ Bernice nodded understandingly, like an adult patronising a precocious child, but the nod gradually transmuted into a shake. ‘So, sorry to be dense, but how exactly does this relate to me?’

Wishveel frowned. Disturbingly, the frown didn’t seem able to move the skin around his large eyes, leaving them as clear and blank as before. ‘There are four of us – you are to be the fifth. It’s very clear. We’ve known all along we’d find another. There are, after all, five prizes, so there should be five on the quest.’ He looked around at his companions who all nodded as if this was blindingly obvious.

‘You have brown hair,’ Arbour said. ‘You defeated the green worm – it’s all as the Oracle said.’

‘You’re a stranger,’ Deash added. ‘But’ – and he smiled at her with a wry friendliness that relaxed her a little – ‘we very much hope that you will soon become a friend.’

Bernice crossed her arms over her chest. ‘And the moon making the grass grow backwards?’

‘Clearly that has yet to come,’ Wishveel said, with a scary lack of irony.

‘Well, I really would love to join your quest,’ Bernice said. ‘And it really was awfully clever of your Oracle to foresee all this, but I actually have some rather pressing business of my own I have to be getting on with.’

‘There is no more pressing business than this,’ Deash said. ‘We’re questing at the behest of the Emperor himself. And without you, our final quest will fail. Is that really what you want to happen?’

Bernice looked round at them, at Deash watching her with friendly firmness, Wishveel’s lunatic, intense eyes, Arbour and Sloravian both scowling, their hands clasped to the hilts of their swords, and she thought very carefully about her answer.

* * *

Thiss pulled his fourth and fifth arms into his body, wrapping them twice around the column of his torso, but even so he couldn’t prevent himself from brushing up against the bodies of the aliens. He saw that his men were having the same problem, all of them flushing patterns of violet and pulsing black disgust across their exposed skin. Just as well these humans were deaf to the flesh-language.

Those at the back of their party were fully swaddled in black cloaks, nothing of them exposed to the stinking, putrid atmosphere of this planet. They were no doubt boiling inside their wrappings, on this world so much hotter and and drier than their own, but Thiss considered them the lucky ones.

Another of the human creatures pushed past Thiss, its pink, too-thick, too-soft arm brushing briefly against his exposed right gill. He shuddered, his skin flinching instinctively away from the contact,

mottling to a shocked blue-brown and tensing into the texture it had last worn during the period of ritual mourning for the Death of the World. And their *voices* – the terrible, rasping roar of them, as harsh as the sand beneath Thiss's feet.

Creeeel leaned closer to him so that he could speak privately with his left mouth. 'A mistake. A mistake. We're making a mistake.'

He sounded almost hysterical. He had always been the least taken with this plan. The most determined that there must be some other way. But -

'There is no other way,' Thiss said. 'If there had been, we would have found it.'

He was almost disappointed when Creeeel bunched his feeding tendrils in agreement. Even now, Thiss hoped that he might be wrong – but he knew that he wasn't. This was a desperate measure. And they were desperate people.

Chapter Two

The next quest, Bernice discovered, took them right through a place known as the Forbidden Forest. Well, of course it did.

'So,' she said. 'If slaying the Enormous Monster of Weetabix

'The Great Beast of Wendt,' Deash supplied helpfully. He was leaning back on his elbow, looking at her thoughtfully as the firelight burnished the grey of his hair to silver. They'd carried on walking through the bulk of the day, stopping only as the late-setting sun of summer sank down out of sight and the green light of the forest faded to an impenetrable, almost physically tangible black. Then they'd set up camp, glancing askance at Bernice's primitive field tent as they put up their own rather more elaborate affairs. They'd looked even more disapproving when Bernice had pulled out her field rations.

'Nature provides, that's the way of it on a quest,' Wishveel had said, and had taken his scary eyes away to hunt the small, warm-blooded things that lurked in the twisted bows of the trees.

Bernice was finishing off the remains of one of them now, a thin-limbed creature which looked rather too much like a monkey for comfort. Still, she thought, idly using a twig to pick out the remains of it from between her teeth, she could reliably inform the world that it did indeed taste like chicken.

'So,' she persevered, stretching her back comfortably, trying to catch a glimpse of stars through the thick canopy of the trees, 'if that was the third quest, what were the first two?'

'The Griffin's Egg was number one,' Sloravian said. 'Cost me this,' – he held out his hand, and Bernice noticed for the first time that his middle finger was missing, sheered clean off just above the knuckle – 'but it was a small price to pay.'

'After that, we captured the wind,' Arbour said.

Bernice very carefully didn't react. 'I see. And where is it now?'

Arbour took out a small golden chest and held it out reverently towards her. She took it hesitantly, but it just looked like a rather ornate golden casket.

Deash seemed to read her expression. He smiled slightly. 'Hold it to your ear,' he said.

She shrugged, then did as he suggested – and was astonished to hear a sound like a force nine gale emerging from the small box. Wow,' she said. 'You really did capture the wind.'

Deash nodded. 'When we first heard the tasks, we thought they were impossible. We thought that we were meant to fail – as many men had before us – but the Emperor would never be that unjust.'

'And,' she said carefully. 'Well, you mentioned prizes..?'

‘Yes,’ Arbour said. ‘Five prizes for the five of us.’

‘And they are..?’

They were all staring at her in astonishment now. She looked round at them guilelessly. ‘What? What did I say?’

Deash’s expression cleared. ‘We’re sorry – we assumed everyone had heard of our quests – but you truly are a stranger, as the Oracle foretold. The prizes are the most valuable there are – the Emperor’s most treasured possessions.’

Bernice clapped her hands together, then rubbed them acquisitively. ‘Sounds great to me. So what exactly is the final quest? Capturing the Golden Chariot of the Sun? A hair from the head of the Man in the Moon?’

Sloravian didn’t smile. He obviously thought she was being serious. ‘No,’ he said. ‘We’re to enter the Cursed Lands and bring back a seedling from the Forbidden Forest.’

‘Great,’ Bernice said. ‘I can hardly wait.’

The palace was better, Thiss thought. Fewer of these humans, less squirming pink flesh to avoid. Less noise. But far more danger.

In the first chamber they presented their gifts to a flunky and told him that they wished an audience with the Emperor. Thiss couldn’t read the flunky’s expression, of course, couldn’t even be sure which part of the thing’s body it used to express feeling. But something about the way the hard muscles under the creature’s strange, five-frilled, inflexible right tentacle tensed as it took the proffered gift told him that the creature found him as repugnant as he found it.

Thiss tried to see himself through its eyes for a minute. Its two eyes. How did they see the world: flat, singular, confined? And Thiss would seem – large, obviously, towering a head higher than the human thing. Thiss’s tentacles must seem too soft, and far too many of them, twining around his body in a constant motion which must appear restless to the pink creature with its terrible, death-like stillness. They’re creatures of land, Thiss thought, and we’re creatures of the ocean – we were never meant to meet.

After the flunky, they were taken through security. The creatures came towards them clutching machines in their hands, rods and other devices which looked more invasive than Thiss had expected. Behind him, his black-robed companions took an alarmed step back.

‘Our women,’ Thiss said, through the translation device clipped to his belt. ‘We do not like them to be touched by others.’

‘Of course,’ the human said, and Thiss thought it might have sounded shocked. ‘Only the men.’

The security check found nothing on Thiss and his men, because there was nothing to find. And then they were taken on, down endless

corridors, all straight lines, right angles, cloth and metal in bright red and gold and silver that hurt Thiss's eyes. The humans were here too, but hidden, watching from the shadows, their gazes following Thiss and his men everywhere they went.

And then, finally, they were in front of the Emperor.

The Emperor had that terrible stillness about him, perched on his throne high above the room as if he was also keen to escape the squirming pink masses below him. But beneath the Emperor's calm, Thiss sensed a mind at work so keen it seemed to animate its body even when it wasn't moving.

Dangerous, Thiss thought. So very dangerous. So very foolish of us to have come, and too late now to flow away from trouble, as his race had learnt long ago to do. He felt his flesh crinkling and darkening, an admission of guilt that any one of his own species would have instantly recognised. The Emperor bared its teeth, and for a moment Thiss thought that it had been able to read his involuntary signal too and was preparing an attack. But no, he realised after a moment, this was just a gesture of friendship.

Thiss opened his mouth fronds wide, hoping the humans would recognise that as a mirror of their own gesture. Then he bowed low. 'Greetings, Great One.'

The Emperor's bared teeth glistened in the sunlight streaming in through windows far overhead. 'Greetings, travellers. You are welcome here.'

'Great One, though we come from a world so distant its sun barely troubles your night sky, we have heard much of the great markets of Portred. We beg permission to trade our paltry goods with yours.'

The Emperor's teeth were hidden now. Nothing else about its pink face told Thiss anything of what it was feeling. But its head nodded downwards slightly. 'Granted. We will, naturally, need to discuss terms.'

'Of course,' Thiss said, though he didn't begin to understand what this meant. On the great markets of Home, the honour was in the giving, the most honour for those who gave the most. He knew, here, that currency was exchanged for goods, but beyond that he was lost. 'Before we do, though, a boon,' he said.

'You may ask anything of us,' the Emperor said. 'And if it is in our power, we will grant it.'

For one second, Thiss thought that this might be the truth, that his whole mission might have been unnecessary. But no, he saw from the calm reaction of the courtiers around them that this was just a customary term. A belittling, a way for the Emperor to say that its people had so much and they, being so poor, could want so little, that it would cost them nothing to give it.

Well, let the Emperor see.

'It is our women,' Thiss said. 'They are unaccustomed to crowds. I would ask that they be shown to a private room where they can rest away from prying eyes.'

He heard a high thin sound come from some of the humans around him, and realised after a second that it was a sign of amusement. It amused them to think that any of their men might get some pleasure from eyeing Thiss's women.

But the Emperor gave no reaction. 'Forgive me for not thinking of it sooner,' he said. 'Let them be shown to the Silver Suite.' He waved at some courtiers, who snapped towards Thiss's black-cloaked companions, arms held out in beckoning gestures.

So, Thiss's intelligence had been right. Perhaps this might work after all.

Bernice hadn't been looking forward to finding out what the Forbidden Forest was like. After all, the Old Forest had been spectacularly terrifying, and no one had even bothered to give that an ominous name.

But the Forbidden Forest was actually lovely. The trees which had towered over her earlier shrank down to a more manageable height, the bright, fresh green of their leaves filtering but no longer blocking the sun.

'I didn't expect it to be so beautiful,' Sloravian said, echoing Bernice's unspoken thought.

'Just why is it forbidden?' Bernice asked. An instant later, as the others all snapped their heads round to look at her, she regretted it. Every child on this planet probably grew up hearing the legend of the Forbidden Forest.

After a moment, though, Dreash's expression cleared and he laughed. 'Do you know, in all my life I've never thought to question it. It's just one of those facts, like the sun rising in the west.'

'I heard the Emperor's allowed in here. That once in every Emperor's reign, he makes the pilgrimage here, a pilgrimage here and to the Cursed Lands, and he comes away with a terrible knowledge he has to carry to his grave.' Arbour's expression was salacious, like an office worker gossiping about the boss around the water cooler.

'Any thoughts about what that knowledge is?' Bernice asked as casually as possible.

'Perhaps we'll find out,' Arbour said. He gestured around him. 'The last quest is said to be the hardest. Though this place seems far more peaceful than I'd imagined. I can't see anything harming us here.'

That, of course, was just asking for trouble.

The first things to attack them were the pixies. They came out of the

trees, no more than five inches long, gossamer wings buzzing like hummingbirds, and five of them sank their fangs into Dreash. He let out a thin, surprised yelp.

Bernice whipped out her machete in a smooth move, if she said so herself, then realised with embarrassment that everyone else had pulled out their guns. Clearly, this whole knight business was easy to get carried away with.

The little bastards weren't easy to hit. Wishveel picked off three in rapid succession, but his next five shots went wide and one pulse-beam passed so close to Dreash's head that Bernice smelt it singe his hair.

'Back to back!' Bernice yelled, and the others obeyed her, even though she was the only one without a gun. She flicked out her machete a few times, just for the look of it, but was relieved that the pixies were much faster than she was. They were too cute to kill, even though one of them had given her a nip on the arm that was weeping blood into the crook of her elbow.

After that, it didn't take long to finish the rest off. Bernice felt slightly nauseous throughout the whole thing. They looked exactly like miniature people, tiny fingers and tiny toes. Their naked skin glowed a healthy pink. But when Dreash casually turned one of the dead beings over with his foot, Bernice saw that its face was as blank and brutal as a snake's.

What the hell are they? she wanted to ask, but was afraid that she was already supposed to know.

Wishveel asked the question for her, and the others all shook their heads. 'I've never heard of them,' Dreash said. Not even in the stories my mother told me as a child.'

'Maybe they're why the forest is forbidden,' Bernice said.

Dreash shook his head. 'I'd like to believe that. But I think the Great Beast came from the Forest, too, long ago. I think everything strange and unnatural in our world was born here.'

He was right. The next thing to attack them was so odd, Bernice didn't even have a name for it. It was big and blobby and grey and it looked like it had absorbed every organic thing it had ever rolled over and somehow fused with it, furry legs and horribly human limbs sticking out of its gelatinous bulk.

It wasn't too difficult to kill. A few well-placed laser blasts and an elegant arcing slice of Arbour's blade, and it was all over. But when one of its stunted limbs flailed out at Bernice in its death throes, the material of her jerkin rotted to nothing where it had touched her.

'Look,' Bernice said after that. 'Why don't we just find a sapling and get the hell out of here? I mean, this is all very adventurous, and terribly dashing, but I thought the point of quests – ignoring all the

fripperies and stripping it down to essentials – is to survive them.'

'What saplings?' Dreash asked succinctly.

He was right again. Bernice noticed for the first time that every single tree around her was mature, towering at least twenty feet above them. And there was no undergrowth, nowhere a sapling might have been hiding, just a low carpet of grassy moss so smooth it almost qualified as a lawn.

It occurred to her for the first time that there was something very odd about the Forbidden Forest.

There was something odd about her fellow travellers, too. It took her a little while to work out what it was. They seemed normal enough, chatting on about the kinds of things men usually chatted on about. Women, mainly. But then she started listening to what they were actually saying.

'They must be controlled,' Sloravian said. 'They're like… like nature. Beautiful but in need of taming.'

'Disciplining,' Arbour added. 'Their impulses are too strong. They'd destroy us all if we let them.'

'Really?' Bernice said, in her most low-pitched voice.

'I wouldn't have said that, Bernhart.' Dreash was looking at her in what, after a moment, she realised was a fatherly way. 'Women are just like us.'

The others all looked at him as if he'd lost his mind.

He smiled, clearly expecting their reaction. 'Like us, but weaker. They don't need us to control them, they need us to guide them. They know so little about the world – they rely on us to interpret it for them. And to shield them from it.' He looked at Bernice again, eyes twinkling. 'It's frightening, I know, the thought of that responsibility, but there are rewards too – believe me.'

Arbour leaned in towards her. 'Dreash was married,' he said. 'For five years.'

And that was when it struck Bernice. These people were talking about women this way because they actually knew nothing about them. Women weren't just repressed in this society, they were invisible. She doubted any of these men had ever met a woman outside of their immediate families. Even then, they might not have actually seen them. Past the age of breastfeeding it was quite possible that boys never even saw their mothers outside their all-enveloping robes. These men probably didn't even know what their women looked like. And come to think of it, neither did Bernice. Their race was clearly humanoid, but extreme gender dimorphism was still a possibility. She felt that itching in her fingers which always accompanied an intense impulse to indulge in some research.

Sloravian said to Dreash, and Bernice could see from his tentative,

almost embarrassed expression that he was about to ask him something about women, for some piece of privileged knowledge.

Dreash's face closed like a fist. 'No. No, I've said enough.'

They walked in awkward silence for a few minutes after that.

It was a while before Bernice realised that they were walking through a city. At first it was no more than a shadow in the moss, like a coral reef seen through deep water. Gradually, though, the shadows began to extend into the third dimension. Soon, Bernice and her companions were forced to weave their way through metres-high walls.

'What is this place?' she asked Dreash.

He shrugged, a muscular twitch of his shoulders. 'I've never heard of any cities in the forest. I thought there was nothing here but trees.'

Bernice studied the ruins as she walked. There was something, she realised after a while, strangely modern about them, for all their ages-old decay. It was partly their clean lines, but more than that, the strange angles, the glimmers of a material that wasn't wood or brick or even plascrete shining through the moss.

She gave up trying to snatch glimpses and just stopped, kneeling in front of one of the walls to scrape the moss away. The others all turned round to look at her, silently.

After a while, the moss was cleared, and her fingernails were scraping against something else. They made a strange sound as they moved against the surface of the wall, like a cracked bell ringing. As more of the surface cleared, she began to make out shapes beneath it. Moving shapes.

'What are you doing?' Wishveel finally asked, his wide eyes accusing.

Benny gestured him to be quiet, forgetting for a moment that he wasn't a student out on an expedition. 'Help me,' she said.

Wishveel stared at her a moment longer, then knelt down beside her. 'Why?' he said, but even as he asked it he was helping her to scrape away more of the moss from the strange surface of the wall.

'Come on, don't you have any curiosity?' Bernice asked. 'I mean, doesn't this look odd to you?'

'It's *forbidden*,' Arbour said sternly.

'If it's that forbidden, why did the Emperor send us in here?'

That, Bernice could see, stumped them.

'This might be crucial,' she continued, 'this could be the way to solve the quest. We haven't exactly found any seedlings yet, have we? And we've been going through this place for what feels like an eternity. Maybe this will tell us why.'

Except, when the others had finished helping her to clear the wall, it didn't tell them anything about where the seedling was. On the

other hand, it certainly told Bernice something. It told her that there was something very weird indeed about this planet.

The wall was alive, or at least something inside it was. Beneath the crystalline surface, things moved, shapes that seemed organic yet were like no living creature Bernice had ever seen. Their movements seemed fluid, almost hypnotic – Bernice realised she'd almost nodded off, watching them, when she was startled awake by a sudden jab of movement under the surface of the wall, a spiked, multi-faceted globe in a heartbreakingly pure blue suddenly expanding into a perfect emerald-green sphere.

She backed hurriedly away.

'What the hell is that?' Dreash asked, sounding shaken for the first time since Bernice had met him.

Surprisingly, it was Wishveel who answered him, his voice quiet and almost scared. 'It's from the Before Time,' he said.

Bernice wasn't going to let the fact that she was obviously already meant to know what that was deter her. 'The Before Time?'

Wishveel turned his large, startled eyes on her. 'The time we never speak of, when we were weak – like women.' Over his shoulder, Bernice could see the strange shapes still writhing and spinning beneath the surface of the ancient modern wall.

And then she saw something even stranger.

One of the shapes wasn't beneath the surface any longer – it was breaking through it. Unconsciously, Bernice reached out and grasped Wishveel's arm in a grip so tight she heard him gasp.

'Look,' she said.

The others were all staring at it now, Arbour's eyes squinted down to narrow slits of sky blue, Dreash's muscles knotted so tight Bernice could trace the shape of them beneath his jerkin.

As they watched, the shape – a strange, yellow-green string of matter arched and shrugged its way through the seemingly solid surface, like a worm crawling out of treacle. It was a worm, Bernice realised, or perhaps a young snake, but its mottled reptilian skin was banded with rings of what appeared to be feathers.

The shape hunched and drew itself up, seeming to strain with effort. And then it was entirely clear of the wall. It flopped onto the grass beside them and with a startling speed its little yellow and green body shot away across the moss-covered forest floor, quickly lost to sight.

'What?' Arbour said. 'What?'

'Well,' Bernice said briskly, 'that answers quite a few questions.'

Dreash looked at her, eyebrow raised in query. He seemed to have regained his composure, but Bernice sensed a wariness about him when it came to her that hadn't been there before. *I know too much about things no one's supposed to know anything about*, she thought.

Story of my life.

'New things are born here,' she said. 'That's why they aren't out in the forest.' She frowned, thoughtfully. 'Good lord, I may actually have finally answered the question of why one never sees any baby pigeons.'

The others all looked at her blankly. 'The seedling will be here,' she said. 'If we search along the walls we're bound to find one.'

Dreash found the first, a tiny little thing that was more like a bonsai than a young tree. But then Wishveel gave a cry of triumph as he found one too, and Bernice felt she'd gone one better than any of them when she found a little forest of saplings, bright green with the unique vigour of youth, each no more than two feet tall.

'The quest is completed,' Arbour said. His face split into a wide grin of triumph, teeth a slash of white across his tanned face. 'Now we can return and collect our brides.'

Bernice wasn't really listening to him; she couldn't take her eyes off the collection of seedlings. There was something very, very wrong with the little trees. Like the feathered serpent, they were collages of things that didn't belong together. One of them, no taller than Bernice's knee, had fleshy leaves – not succulent like a desert plant but composed of actual flesh. Bernice could see little veins running beneath their surface, blood pumping under their translucent skins.

She shuddered. Another of the things had a bark that appeared to be metallic. She could see it glittering red in the light of the setting sun, and when she reached out a tentative hand to touch it, it was smooth and shockingly hot beneath her fingers. A third had long, blonde hair covering its leaves and, as she watched, a fourth opened the line of tiny beaks along its trunk and let out a chorus of distressed *cheeps.*

'Chimeras,' Bernice said. 'Genetic Frankenstein's monsters.' Then she performed what she would afterwards realise was a perfect double-take, snapping her head round to look at Arbour in disbelief.

'Excuse me,' she said. 'Did you just mention something about "brides"?' Arbour threw his head back and laughed, joyously.

'Yes, of course,' Dreash said. 'Now that we've completed the quest, the Emperor's daughters can be ours.'

Sloravian's lips twisted into a sly expression. 'You're going to be a husband at last,' he said to Bernice. 'Does that make you nervous, boy?'

Bernice knew it wouldn't be very manly to faint, but the temptation was enormous.

Chapter Three

Bernice was supposed to be preparing for her wedding but she couldn't stop thinking about the chimeras, the Forbidden Forest, the whole strange buried past of this planet. Well, it beat thinking about her impending nuptials to the Emperor's eldest daughter, Jesh. She was doing her best not to even go there.

But, on the upside, the fact that in under 24 hours she was due to be married to the Emperor's daughter did have some advantages. For a start, she'd had the chance to ride back into Portred in state, in a carriage pulled by what really did appear to be unicorns. She'd also eaten so much at her victory feast that her prostheses were in danger of popping.

But the real upside was that she was now ensconced inside the Imperial Palace, the one place on the planet where she might stand any chance of finding some answers to the question of the origin of the ruins in the Forbidden Forest. It wasn't sensible, of course, to go exploring uninvited through the most heavily guarded centre of power of one of the galaxy's more repressive regimes. Especially when you were hiding as big a secret as Bernice was. But on the other hand, Bernice was due to get married in just under 24 hours so really, what did she have to lose?

Especially since she'd discovered that her bride to be, Jesh, had been the one to design the demented quests that the men had been sent on. The fact that they happened to have somehow managed to complete them seemed to be pure coincidence and not, Bernice suspected, part of Jesh's original plan. Jesh appeared to be a woman with no desire whatsoever to actually get married. So at least Bernice and her bride-to-be had that in common. That and the fact that they were both women, of course.

The palace was huge, more of a mini-city than a building. It had been built over many hundreds of years, different styles of architecture and ornamentation layered like a palimpsest, overwriting but not erasing each other.

The first room she found was filled with nothing but golden statues, ranging from tiny things little longer than her finger to one so tall its head scraped the twenty-foot high ceiling. They were in different poses, different clothes; they showed him at different ages, but they all showed the same man. They were of different qualities, too, some crude as primitive tribal artwork, others so polished they lacked all personality. In one the man's face was drawn down into an expression of such intense anger that Bernice found herself taking an involuntary step back. In another he was smiling and approachable, affable.

The Emperor, Bernice guessed. Her father-in-law to be.

She hurriedly left that room, with its hundreds of blank, staring eyes.

The next room she came to was full of paintings, holo-forms, scent-sculptures, all of them of men. Many of them were nudes. Bernice supposed that in a society where even looking at women was forbidden, art would have evolved along different lines from her own, celebrating and eroticising the male body because that was all it knew. Still, it was undeniably homoerotic. She wondered if that was the Emperor's personal leaning, or if he had a room full of female nudes hidden away somewhere else in his palace-city.

The third great chamber she came to was the library. It was vast – a city within a city within a city, a maze of books and word-cubes and terminal after terminal for accessing data which was only stored electronically.

A lesser scholar than Bernice might have been intimidated by the sheer volume of material, and by the absence of any discernible system of cross-referencing. But over the years, Bernice had developed a finely honed instinct for finding the material she needed. She had named it her Archaeologist's Nose – although only to herself.

Through a process of triangulation she first sought out the section dealing with science, then the one dealing with ancient history – the Before Time as her travelling companions had called it – and from there she was able to narrow in on the history and prehistory of science. No one stopped her or asked her what she was doing.

In fact, there was no one else in the library at all. It didn't surprise her. A society as secretive about its past as this one would hardly have gone about instilling a passionate curiosity in its populace. Tyrannies were all about control, and the most important thing of all they could control was knowledge.

She found the ten most germane books, a pile of relevant word cubes and some crumbling scrolls which might or might not have been relevant but smelt old and were therefore irresistible to Bernice. Then she scattered them around one table, and got to work.

Four hours later, she knew that her suspicions were correct and the official history was wrong. Atwalla was a civilisation in technological decline, shedding not gaining knowledge. The science books were infuriatingly scrappy – censored, she suspected, long in the past, the ommissions filled in by later guesses, the guesses elaborated by even later fantasists. She didn't believe, for example, that Atwallans had ever been able to transmute base metal into gold, whatever their history books might claim.

She did believe, however, that the people of Atwalla had once been extremely accomplished genetic engineers, perhaps the most

accomplished the galaxy had ever known. They seemed to have been capable of a level of precision and sheer lunatic imagination in their design that other societies had either failed to reach, or seen the possibility of and hurriedly banned.

It was intriguing. Technological decay was very, very rare. Usually, only catastrophic war or natural disaster on a global scale could account for it, and there was no evidence of either on Atwalla. They seemed simply to have developed their science to a level where it was approaching magic – then deliberately forgotten it all. Suppressed it even. What had they discovered that had frightened them so much?

A stabbing pain in Bernice's back gradually intruded into her consciousness, telling her that she'd been sitting in one position far too long. She leaned back, rolling her neck to work out the crick with an audible pop.

'I never thought to have a scholar for a daughter-son,' a voice said behind her.

Bernice's head snapped round to face the newcomer, and she let out a yelp of mingled surprise and pain as all the tender muscles were pulled instantly taut.

The man who'd spoken was tall and thin, almost gawky, and with a mouth so wide it seemed to extend beyond the edges of his face. He should have been ugly, he was ugly, but there was something attractive about him too, some indefinable quality.

After a second, Bernice realised that it was his aura of casual power.

A second after that, she realised that this was the Emperor.

He looked both exactly and nothing like the many images of him she'd seen earlier. The outlines of the face were the same, but the animating principle behind it was so full of energy that it was impossible to capture in a lifeless object. Bernice hurriedly scrambled out of her chair and fell to her knees, hoping it was the right thing to do.

It seemed to be. The Emperor nodded graciously, then smiled – a much more human expression – and reached out an arm to help Bernice to her feet.

'Sir Bernhart. I suppose I should not be surprised to find you with the books. How else could you have overcome the obstacles my daughter placed in the way of her hand?' Something about the Emperor's tone of voice told Bernice that he knew full well his daughter had never intended her quests to be completed.

'I was raised to love knowledge,' Bernice said, hoping that was sufficiently neutral.

The Emperor 's smile widened, but now there seemed to be an edge to it. 'Indeed,' he said. 'Even when such knowledge was not meant to be shared.'

‘Erm, what?’ Bernice said.

The Emperor gestured around him. ‘This is my library. It isn’t intended for the… casual browser. Even if he is soon to be a member of my family.’

‘Oh, I’m terribly sorry,’ Bernice said. ‘I had no idea it was – well, no one told me I wasn’t supposed to come here.’

The Emperor studied her closely. ‘People don’t generally need to be told.’

‘No, of course,’ Bernice replied. ‘I apologise, your, er, your holiness?’

‘My grace,’ the Emperor corrected, but she could see that he was amused. ‘You’re one of my off-planet subjects, aren’t you? I really must step up the education on the rim.’

‘Yes, your grace.’ Bernice bowed her head so that he wouldn’t see the relief on her face.

That seemed to finish the matter for the Emperor, and he turned his attention to the books she’d been studying. Bernice felt a fresh knot of fear tying itself in her stomach.

The one he picked up happened to be a study of women’s roles in ancient society. Bernice had been interested to discover that the Atwallans’ decline in scientific knowledge had correlated closely with their declining attitude to women.

‘So, it’s a particular kind of knowledge you’ve been chasing, Sir Bernhart,’ the Emperor said, his voice giving nothing away.

Bernice knew, instinctively, that she was in very dangerous waters indeed.

She looked up at the Emperor, letting all of her fear show in her face. ‘I’m to be married tomorrow, your grace. I’ve never spoken to a woman, and tomorrow I’m to bind myself to one for the rest of my life. I wanted to find out everything I could about them.’

The Emperor studied her in silence for a very long time. After only a few seconds, Bernice lowered her eyes, deciding that it was unwise to attempt a staring match with a man who had the power to murder her on a whim.

So she was startled when she felt the Emperor slip his arm around her shoulders, and heard him settle onto the bench-seat beside her.

‘A deep thinker, then. I’m glad you’re the one to be wed to Jesh. She deserves someone with more than muscle between his ears. Someone who’s not ruled by the meat between his legs.’

Bernice smiled tentatively. ‘Well, I can promise you I’m not ruled by that. Your grace.’

He turned to face her fully, and it struck Bernice that this wasn’t a man with muscle between his ears either. ‘You’re right to look in the history books for understanding. Because the relations between a man

and his wife mean far more than coupling for pleasure or making new men and women to be husbands and wives.'

'But in the end, isn't that what it comes down to?' Bernice said, intrigued, and forgetting for a minute that she wasn't addressing an equal. 'The socio-political context only accounts for so much. In the end, it's two individuals who have to make a life together.'

He shook his head. 'No. You must never think that. Your duty to your wife is your duty to your people. Throughout time, not just here, but on every world where a species is divided by gender, marriage – between peoples – has been one of two binary choices.'

Bernice nodded – it was a theory she'd heard before. 'Marry or fight. Marriage is one of the oldest ways that warring peoples make alliances, creating a link of blood in the joined children that turn enemies into family,' she said. 'But we grow out of that. It's the point of getting civilised.'

The Emperor's bright eyes stared into hers, startlingly green. Bernice could see tiny reflections of herself in their pupils. She was leaning forward, face flushed with the enjoyment of the debate.

'Yes, we ended it,' the Emperor said. 'Women were once the currency we traded for peace. Now we're stronger, we don't need to make such sordid bargains. We can keep our women to ourselves.'

'But those aren't the only two choices,' Bernice protested. 'Sell the women as slaves on another planet, or keep them as slaves here. Besides –' And she was about to tell him what she'd discovered, that women had been more not less respected in the past, when she saw the passionate, almost evangelical expression in his eyes, realised how unwise that would be and shut her mouth with a snap. 'Besides,' she continued carefully after a moment, 'even knowing that marriage is a duty to my people doesn't help me to know what to do. Well…' She contrived to look embarrassed. It didn't take much acting. 'It doesn't tell me what to do with my wife when I've got her.'

The Emperor laughed, sounding almost relieved, and slapped her on the back. 'Young man, societies make marriages, but as for the enjoying of them – that we can leave up to nature. When you see my Jesh for the first time, you'll know what to do with her. Now come with me and get to your bedchamber. Nature's course will definitely be helped by sleep.'

And with a fatherly arm over Bernice's shoulder, he led her out of the room. He seemed to have lost all his earlier suspicion, but she caught glints of his bright green eye flicking sideways towards her as they walked, appraising, and she knew that she needed to be very careful indeed around this man.

Although all that was likely to become a moot point tomorrow, when Jesh discovered that her new husband was carrying no meat

whatsoever between his legs.

In a room close by, some figures were shedding their cloaks. If anyone had been there to observe them, they would have been unable to distinguish the bodies they revealed from the bi-octopoid males who had accompanied them.

They had the same twirl of tentacles, the same mottled, reptilian skin, its texture and colour in a constant state of flux. Even their faces appeared the same. The observer would have to conclude that this was a species without sexual dimorphism, that only in the DNA and the internal reproductive organs could the difference be discerned. It was a natural assumption to make, and the observer couldn't have been expected to know that it was also completely wrong. The reason that the cloaked figures so exactly resembled the male members of their species was that they, too, were male.

Sval peeled off the last layer of black clothing and took a moment to enjoy the fresh, moist air on his unpleasantly dry skin.

'It is too soon, too quick – we should have had much longer. Why must we change our plan because of someone else's mistake?' Jlaal said.

Sval brought his tentacles in tight to his face, displeased. 'We have no choice,' he replied, flashing black bands across his chest to indicate that this conversation must end.

'We are not ready,' Jlaal continued, ignoring the signal, and tensing his skin into a course network of bumps in reply, a signal that he felt confident in the rightness of his position. Around him, the others gathered, skins violet with disquiet.

'Then we must make ourselves ready,' Sval said. 'We cannot afford to fail.'

At that, Jlaal's skin smoothed and blanked to a calm but determined yellow. He knew that Sval was right. They only had one chance and – no matter what the cost, what the difficulties – they had to succeed.

After her cosy little chat with the Emperor, Bernice found that two guards had been stationed outside her door, tall men with olive faces and burnished armour. They didn't try to stop her leaving the room, but they followed her everywhere she went. Even, she discovered, the toilet. She wasn't sure if the Emperor had put them there as a mark of respect, because after her little speech to him he no longer quite trusted her, or because he was afraid that her wedding nerves would get the better of her and she'd jilt his daughter at the altar. Whichever it was, the practical upshot was the same.

Bernice was getting married in the morning.

The phrase ran round and round in her head, banishing any possibility of sleep in the impossibly large, impossibly soft bed in her

room. The room that in less than 24 hours would become a bridal chamber.

In the morning her eyes felt like someone had rubbed chilli sauce over them, her mouth gritty from lack of sleep. Annoyingly, though, she also felt sharply awake – no sleepy haze to help carry her through the day ahead.

A bevy of men came in first to help her prepare for the ceremony, washing her hands, scenting her hair and dressing her in an outfit so heavy with jewellery and stiff with embroidery that it felt like wearing a small house. Ritual words were muttered as she dressed but Bernice didn't join in and no one seemed to mind.

'Nervous?' one of the men asked Bernice.

She nodded, her mouth too dry to speak.

After that they led her down a corridor that, to her sleep-hazed mind, seemed to stretch ahead of her into infinity. Or perhaps it really was that long. Her legs were certainly aching by the time she reached the end of it, buckling under the weight of her enormous outfit. She was glad that mirrors seemed to be forbidden to a groom-to-be – she suspected that she looked utterly ridiculous, but preferred not knowing for sure.

'Best day of my life,' one of the men accompanying her stooped to whisper in her ear. He nudged Bernice and winked. She imagined it was intended to be friendly, but he was one of those people who couldn't shut one eye without half-closing the other, and the expression pulled his face into a fearsome grimace.

At the end of the infinite corridor was an infinite room, its ceiling so high that Bernice swore she could see clouds hanging under it. Or maybe it was a mug of perspiration from all the people inside sweating under outfits almost as overwrought as her own.

Here, for the first time since she'd arrived at the palace, she saw her questing companions again. She was pleased to see that they all looked as nervous as she did. Arbour had been poured into an outfit which contrived to be both skintight and absurdly bulky, and was just the wrong shade of green for his currently sickly complexion. Wishveel looked like he might faint at any moment, Sloravian like he already had. Dreash managed a tight smile. Bernice bared her teeth in return.

The entire population of the planet seemed to have been brought in to witness the event. Many of them didn't seem to have bothered washing for the occasion – or perhaps fear really did sharpen your senses. Bernice found herself almost gagging on the sour odour of elderly sweat.

She and her four companions marched in step along the length of the room. The floor was polished marble and Bernice concentrated all

her energy on not slipping.

At the foot of the altar – a towering golden structure the size of a small planet – Bernice finally saw her bride for the first time. Or more precisely, she saw five, amorphous black-shrouded shapes, one of whom was presumably her bride.

Then the black shapes lined up in front of the men, facing them, and Bernice saw that hers was the tallest and thinnest, taller than Bernice herself. The ceremony was complex, dull and very very long.

But not long enough. Four hours after Bernice had arrived in the vast hall, she was married.

Then it was as if someone had taken a tape of the morning and rewound it. Bernice found herself retracing her steps out of the vast room and down the infinite corridor, her entourage of men still in tow with only the one, black-swathed, silent addition by her side. Bernice would have dearly liked to speak to her new wife, try to say something comforting, but the only words that wanted to emerge from her mouth were 'Help! Help! Oh, my good god, what on earth have I landed myself in this time?' so she kept her lips tightly sealed.

And then she was back at the door of her room, and her companions were still with her. One of them opened the door for her with a flourish and gestured her inside. The others all arranged themselves outside, some squatting on their haunches as if they expected to be staying for quite some time.

'Really,' Bernice said. 'There's no need to wait. We might be some time.' She attempted a lascivious grin.

One of the young men, clear-skinned and clear-eyed, frowned. 'But we must wait for the proof.'

Bernice frowned back. 'The proof?'

Several of the others had now risen to stare at her. 'The blood. The proof that your bride has kept herself pure for you.'

Beside her, Bernice felt the black-clothed figure shift uncomfortably.

'But she's the Emperor's daughter!' Bernice said. 'Of course she's still pure!' There was another shift in the figure beside her, perhaps a tensing, though Bernice couldn't begin to judge what it meant.

The other men laughed. 'She may be the Emperor's daughter but she's still a woman. You can't trust anything they say!'

One of the older men, grizzled grey hair sticking out at crazy angles from his head, patted Bernice on the back. 'You'll be all right, son. It only hurts her. And if it doesn't hurt her – we'll hurt her. You won't suffer either way.'

And then they were shoving Bernice and her new bride – Jesh, Bernice reminded herself, who might be a shapeless bundle of black but still has a name – into the bedchamber and the door slammed shut and they were alone.

They looked at each other in silence for a long moment.

'Well…' Bernice said finally.

Nearby, but fast approaching, Sval, Jlaal and three other bi-octopoids were keeping to the shadows, their skins carefully textured and coloured to blend them almost invisibly with the background – lurid red and gold stripes passing over them as they walked past the rich fabrics which draped the walls of the Imperial Palace.

They weren't natural chameleons. This was a skill, a very difficult one, which the men chosen for this mission had spent months perfecting. It required them to control their thoughts and feelings precisely, with absolute discipline.

Sval felt a twitch of anxiety and for a moment his skin flashed a discordant green against the red and gold. He hurriedly marshalled his thoughts and brought his colouring back under control, then flicked his eyestalks around to see if the misstep had been observed.

Not this time. But he must be careful, so careful. The Emperor's daughters were almost within his reach.

As Bernice watched, frozen, the figure in front of her slowly peeled away the concealing layers of black cloth. The peeling went on for a very long time, and Bernice constantly had to revise downward her estimate of the size of the woman hiding beneath. She wondered if she was supposed to help, but there was something about the tight set of the narrow shoulders which were gradually being revealed that told her that any attempt to touch the person in front of her might sent her screaming out of the room.

Hey, me too, Bernice thought. 'It's okay,' she said finally.

The face which had been revealed to her – thin and lush-mouthed, sensual without being exactly pretty – looked as if it didn't believe a word of it.

'Whatever my husband wills,' the woman said. She had a deep, husky voice which Bernice guessed a lot of men would have found sexy. Her figure, finally revealed now dressed only in a delicately embroidered white shift, was more muscular than Bernice had expected. Not womanly at all. But an Atwallan man in Bernice's position, with nothing to compare it against, probably wouldn't be complaining.

'Really, we don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with,' Bernice reiterated.

The figure's dark eyes fell to the ground. 'Then I will be beaten for failing to please you.'

Not by me, you won't!' Bernice insisted.

The eyes rose to meet hers again. 'Not by you, then, but by the others.'

For the first time, Bernice saw a spark of personality in the other woman, something beneath the carefully subservient manner. It began to seem plausible that this was the person who had designed those impossible quests to keep her suitors away. And for the first time Bernice felt a slight spark of hope.

'It seems to me that we may have a shared problem here,' she said.

'What problem, husband?' Jesh asked carefully.

Bernice shrugged and slumped into a chair, slinging her legs casually over one of the arms. 'The fairly fundamental problem that neither of us actually wants to be married.'

As soon as she said it, she realised she'd made a grave mistake. Jesh dropped her eyes again, and the flicker of human warmth which had briefly shone in her face was snuffed out as if it had never existed. 'Husband, how can you say that you do not wish to marry me when you have gone to so very much trouble to win my hand?'

'I…' Bernice said, searching for an answer.

And then a piercing scream echoed through the room from somewhere nearby and saved Bernice from having to find one.

After that, things seemed to happen very fast, and without much time for conscious thought. Which might help to explain how Bernice ended up doing something so very stupid.

The scream was the sound of a human being in agony, and in terrible fear. On another world, a free one, Bernice might have let it be and concentrated on her own not inconsiderable problems. But on a world like Atwalla, if she didn't intervene, there was every chance that no one would.

She raced to the door – then raced back again and grabbed Jesh's arm when she realised that a groom fleeing the bridal chamber alone might not look too good for the bride he'd left behind.

Then, Jesh in tow, she burst out of the room and headed off in pursuit of the source of that terrible noise. The men squatting patiently outside her room were so startled that she was able to leave them in her dust.

The palace was a maze, and the screaming had subsided to a quieter, choked sobbing, but five minutes later Bernice had found its source. Without even thinking she kicked open the door and dragged Jesh inside with her.

The first thing she saw was Dreash, standing with his arm raised, fist clenched, over a tiny, cowering girl. She didn't look to be any older than 16, though her face was so blotched from crying it was hard to tell. As Bernice watched, Dreash raised his foot and kicked the girl hard in the stomach.

'It doesn't hurt that much!' he roared. 'Stop crying, damn it!'

Bernice's mind blanked out in a haze of fury. Her field of vision

tunnelled in on Dreash's broad, confident face. She was half his weight and hadn't had quite such a lifetime of military training. Her punch should have barely rattled him but with the weight of her anger behind it, it knocked him cold to the ground. Three other women arrived just in time to hear the dull crunch as the back of his head smashed against the marble. A pool of blood began creeping out behind it, reflecting back the embossed cherubs on the ceiling as crimson, demonic shadows of themselves. Bernice thought the fall might have killed him.

Jesh turned and stared at the three girls. 'You idiots! What are you doing here?' she said in the tone of voice people only used with their sisters. The girl on the ground got up to join the others, still clutching her stomach and looking almost as scared of Jesh as she had been of Dreash.

Then Jesh turned her eyes to Bernice, and Bernice found herself taking a step back from the anger burning in them. 'You've killed them all,' Jesh said.

'I was rather under the impression I'd actually *saved* your sister's life,' Bernice said.

Jesh looked at her as if she was a moron. 'You've seen their uncovered faces. The punishment for that is death.'

Bernice swallowed through a suddenly bone-dry throat. 'Then I suppose I'd better make a run for it.'

'Not *your* death,' Jesh said. 'Theirs.'

Before Bernice could begin to formulate a response to that, she heard the sound of footsteps approaching, and a voice that she recognised as Arbour's shouting to find out what exactly was going on.

She turned to Jesh. 'There must be a way out of here. A way you know and they don't.'

Jesh looked like she wanted to argue. Perhaps to stay and face the men herself. But one of her sisters, a lanky girl with a horsey face, grabbed her arm. 'Quick, Jesh. The priest passages. They won't know to follow us there.'

And that was how Bernice found herself on the run with all five of the Emperor's daughters.

Chapter Four

‘Where are we going?’ Bernice managed to gasp as she ran beside Jesh through a network of what, from the smell, could only be sewers.

‘I don’t know,’ Jesh replied, equally breathless.

Bernice let that ride for another fifty yards or so, the only sounds the filthy slosh of the water beneath their feet, and the out-of-condition panting of the other four girls. Then, ‘Well, I certainly don’t and since you’re the one who’s in the lead, I feel it rather falls to you.’

‘Out,’ Jesh said. ‘We’re going out.’

Bernice raised an eyebrow, even though in the dark no one would be able to see her do it. ‘And after that?’

When Jesh didn’t reply, Bernice hesitated a moment, then stopped in her tracks. The four girls running behind her failed to stop in time and barrelled into her back in a manner reminiscent of the Keystone Kops. Only her horror at the thought of what exactly was in the water lapping against her feet kept Bernice from falling on her face into it.

Jesh ran on a few paces, then realised she was alone and span round to face them. ‘What are you doing?’ she hissed.

‘Stopping to think,’ Bernice said calmly.

‘They’ll catch us!’ one of the other sisters said, the little girl who had been so badly beaten by Dreash and was now sporting the beginnings of a vibrant black eye.

‘They will if we don’t work out where we’re going,’ Bernice said. ‘But at the moment I can’t hear any sign at all that they’re following us, can you?’

The other girls all looked around, puzzled, but without the sound of their own flight the twisting, gut-like warren of the sewer was almost eerily silent.

When Bernice was sure she’d made her point, she turned back to Jesh. ‘Do you have any friends in the city, anyone who could take you in?’

The other women all stared at her as if she’d gone mad. ‘We know no one, husband,’ Jesh said eventually. ‘Our whole life was in the palace.’

Bernice nodded. She hadn’t really expected any other answer. ‘Then there’s only one place we can go.’ She left a dramatic pause, but no one took the bait, so after a moment she added, ‘The Cursed Lands.’

The younger sisters all looked horrified, and one of them giggled as if they thought she might be making a sick joke, but Bernice could see that Jesh was taking the suggestion seriously. The other girls quietened and watched their sister, deferring to her judgement. Bernice couldn’t help noticing that not one of them had looked her in

the eye since the moment she'd rescued them. They were afraid of her, she realised – a peculiarly unpleasant sensation. Not afraid of her the way you were afraid of someone you knew, but afraid like the terror you had of a strange and unpredictable alien species.

'No one knows what's in the Cursed Lands,' Jesh said slowly. 'No one is allowed to enter them.' Bernice knew that already, from her readings in the Palace Library. It was precisely why she had suggested the Lands as a refuge. That and the fact that they were only half a day's travel by flyer from the palace.

'Except your father,' Bernice corrected. 'Doesn't every Emperor go there once in his reign?'

Jesh nodded. 'I was 14 when he went. Grandfather had just died, father had assumed the throne, and this was his first obligation. He was only gone a day, but when he returned, his face… I don't know what he saw there, but it changed him forever. Do you really think we should go?'

Bernice smiled thinly. 'Do you really think we have a choice?'

'And how do you think we're going to get there?'

That, of course, Bernice didn't know the answer to.

But in the end it was easy. All they needed to do was put normal female clothing on as soon as they were out of the sewers, and they became once again the featureless, indistinguishable black bundles whom Bernice had first met.

Bernice couldn't cover her own face, of course, but a low-slung hat pretty much took care of that. If the Emperor had had any sense, he might have issued an alert for any man walking the streets with five women in tow, but he probably hadn't expected them to be quite as brazen as that.

Only when they came to the copter port, and Bernice had to set about hiring them a flyer, did she begin to appreciate that there might be some problems. People didn't lend out valuable equipment to someone without the necessary papers.

'I left them at home,' Bernice improvised unconvincingly. She held out a hand and clasped the clerk's, making sure he could feel the edge of a money-cube in her palm and edging towards his. 'Couldn't we overlook it just this once, my friend?'

He smiled, the edges of his upturned lips nudging his drooping black moustache out of the way. 'Of course. Of course, my lord. I shall go and fetch you the ignikeys immediately.' He backed, bowing, towards the grey square of his office, face shining with sweat in the noon sun, the cash-cube clutched tightly in his palm.

It was only when he'd disappeared into the office that it occurred to Bernice that he'd never once bothered to check how much she'd given

him.

'Quick,' she said to the girls. 'Into the flyer, now.'

'What?' Jesh's bundled black form, taller than the others, turned to look at her. 'We can't go till he brings the keys.'

'He's not bringing the keys, he's calling your father,' Bernice shouted back, already halfway up the steps to the small craft. She was in luck, the door wasn't locked, groaning open on rusty hydraulics.

Jesh hesitated one moment, just long enough to glance into the office, where Bernice could see that the clerk's back was turned, but not far enough to disguise the fact that he was speaking into a comms unit.

'You're right,' she said. Suddenly panicked, the women all scrambled up the steps after Bernice, throwing themselves into the back of the craft in a tumble of black robes. Jesh was last, glancing behind her as if she didn't want to believe the evidence of her own eyes.

Bernice didn't have time to worry about one stubborn princess. She had more important things to concern her, like how the hell she was going to get this craft started without the ignikey.

Except, she realised a moment later, it was there, a blank cube of memory plastic poking out of the control console. The clerk must merely have been using it as an excuse to get away from them and into the office. Laughing the slightly manic laugh of tension released, Bernice depressed the key and gunned the engine.

Five seconds after she was in the air, the engine roaring and stuttering its poor maintenance record, the sound was joined by the bleating of an alarm klaxon. Bernice could see the clerk's face, equally alarmed, staring out at them from his small, grey office.

Five seconds later, pretty much every other craft on the field seemed to be taking off after them. Someone inside the flyer said 'Shit!' very loudly – almost certainly Bernice.

As soon as they were airborn, the craft had projected a little multicoloured holo-map into the air in front of her eyes. The Cursed Lands were an ominous but helpful black blob to the left of the map. Bernice swerved the steering column hard right, grimacing under the sudden G-force, then pushed the throttle out and gave the little ship its head, testing how fast it could run.

Not very fast, it turned out. They'd barely cleared the perimeter fence of the airbase when the first pursuit craft caught up with them. Bernice could see the pilot, a young man with a shock of startlingly blond-white hair, staring through his screen at them. He looked, incongruously, frightened.

I'm carrying the Emperor's daughters, Bernice realised, *and he's worried that he might have to hurt them.*

Good. She wrenched the column hard left this time, nosing her little craft straight towards his aft engine. His expression transmuted from alarmed to utterly terrified, and he pulled his own craft to the left too, clearing out of Bernice's way – but not out of the way of the sixty-foot tree which was beside him and which he must not have even noticed.

The craft went down in a surprisingly florid fireball. The tree had caught his other engine, Bernice guessed, and there couldn't have been any shielding on the thing. She felt a nasty, greasy lump of guilt in her gut, but she hadn't meant to hurt him and it wasn't just her own life she was trying to save.

After that, it was almost like a game of chicken – only she always knew the other guy was going to dodge first. There were no more crashes, thank goodness, but despite their speed advantage her pursuers fell further and further behind, as she forced them not just away from her but into each other The Keystone Kops Principle in action, she thought – nimbleness isn't possible in groups.

And then all the pursuers were gone, hovering like a crowd of angry wasps caught in a spider's web. For just a second, Bernice was puzzled. Then her focus shifted from the outside of her viewpoint to the inside, to the hovermap floating in front of her eyes. As she watched, the little yellow dot of the flier was swallowed up in the inky stain of the Cursed Lands.

They'd arrived.

Bernice flew around for a while, hoping to find somewhere more hospitable to land the craft, but she quickly realised it was a vain hope. The Cursed Lands were cursed for a reason. She'd seen a fair few post-apocalyptic nightmare landscapes in her time, so she didn't have much capacity left to be shocked but this one really was a doozy. The other women, who had kept up a low hum of conversation throughout their journey, fell utterly silent. She felt the weight of their horror pressing her down into her seat.

In a strange way, it was almost beautiful. The force of some explosion orders of magnitude greater than nuclear had fused the land below her into a glassy smear. The sunlight reflected and refracted through it, blinding rainbows of light, as if they were flying above the world's biggest moonstone. But trapped somewhere beneath the gem-like surface were darker forms, their shapes unknowable, hinting at a price that had been paid for the stark wonder of the landscape.

Eventually, Bernice decided that they'd have to land. She'd been hoping to find water, sustenance, maybe even short-term shelter – that wasn't going to happen, but at least she could conserve fuel while they decided where to go next. It was clear that they couldn't stay here.

On the ground, the land revealed itself to be more varied than it

had seemed from the air, cut into rivulets and gullies where water might once have flowed but never would again. The surface appeared slippery, impossibly smooth, but it was tacky beneath her feet as if the whole terrible disaster had only just occurred, the land still drying and cooling.

'What happened here?' one of the girls asked.

Bernice shook her head. She couldn't begin to guess. To have a catastrophe so total, so devastating, and for it to be contained in so small an area… It was unprecedented and almost inexplicable.

She looked around to find Jesh, to see if there was any clue in what her father had told her to what was going on here, but when she found the other girl it was to see her walking away, shoulders hunched, stumbling on the glassy ridged surface in her haste. Only when she was a good hundred metres away did she turn back to face them, her hand held over her mouth as if she was afraid of what words would come past it if she let them out.

Bernice heard one of the other girls gasp and drop to her knees, and for a moment she thought she was going to be sick. Then she realised that the girl wasn't retching, she was looking – looking at something buried beneath the glass.

Bernice dropped to her own knees, and made the mental adjustment needed to focus her eyes within the glassy, translucent material.

After a moment, it swam into focus. A body, no the topmost of a pile of bodies, perfectly preserved by whatever had ruined the land. They were alien, that much was clear. And many of them, far too many, were children. The one nearest her right boot was a baby, no more than a day old, the wide eyes in its reptilian face the milky, unfocused blue of a human newborn's.

Bernice rose creakily to her feet, walked ten paces, twenty, then dropped to her knees again.

More corpses. These ones looked a little more human, except for the delicate tracery of feathers across their faces. More babies, too.

Another ten paces and these bodies were barely human at all. She tried to focus deeper into the glass, to see how deep the pile of corpses lay, but there seemed to be no end to them.

She ran this time, too fast, needing the pain of the air rasping harshly into her lungs to clear her head. A good half a mile away and she dropped to her knees again. More bodies, more perfectly preserved dead eyes staring up at her in perfectly preserved dead faces.

This hadn't been an accident, or a war. It had been an attempt to hide a genocide.

'Now you see what the women did to my people,' said a voice and it took Bernice a full minute to realise that it wasn't coming from inside

her head. Now do you understand why they have to be controlled?'

She stood and turned, very slowly, holding her hands away from her side. The Emperor was standing ten metres away, pointing the largest of the small arsenal of weapons he was carrying at her. Behind him, twinkling red in the setting sun, Bernice could see his ship. He'd landed it just out of earshot.

'Of course,' she said, proud that her voice remained steady. 'I forgot that there was one person who is allowed to follow us in here,'

Chapter Five

Thiss had asked to see the fires in which the women were to be burned.

'We wish to see how you punish your women, Eminence,' he had said to the Emperor, 'so that we may learn how to punish ours.'

The Emperor's skin had looked pale and damp – much healthier, Thiss thought, but he didn't think this was a natural state for the human. Maybe the Emperor had some feelings about the imminent death of his daughters, though Thiss wasn't sure what these might be. Did humans form attachments to their offspring? Were women considered of so little value that their deaths were considered meaningless? Was death itself seen as a passage, an end, a transformation? Thiss realised how very little he knew about these creatures.

But whatever his feelings, the Emperor had granted Thiss the right to inspect the fire pits where his only children were soon to be immolated.

Thiss's men crowded around him, shivering, their skin the mottled metallic silver of unease. Fire was a great fear to his people, the opposite element to their own, which they neither used nor understood.

'They really mean to kill them here?' Ulver asked, prodding with two of his tentacles at one of the nozzles from which the flame would emerge.

'They really do,' Thiss said. 'And we must be here to watch it.'

Bernice considered that, as cells went, it wasn't too bad. There was actual carpet on the floor and an actual bed with an actual blanket. There were no bars either, just a forcefield across one end of the room which was invisible when looked at straight on but flickered irritatingly in the periphery of her vision. There were two guards outside the door, but not the same guards who had stood outside her bridal chamber. It occurred to her, suddenly, that those men might have paid a price for her escape. Everyone was to pay a heavy price for her escape, it seemed – everyone but her.

When the grim-faced soldiers who'd taken her into custody once the Emperor brought them out of the Cursed Lands had told her the punishment she was due, she'd laughed. The soldiers had looked disapproving, and Bernice had quickly choked it down again.

She hadn't felt much like laughing when they'd told her what was going to happen to the girls, though. Bernice's sentence was a year and a day in prison, in this luxury prison which was considerably

better than many hotels she'd paid actual money to stay in over the years. It was the day that had made Bernice laugh, something absurdly fairy-tale about it. The girls had less than a day before they'd be burned alive, the flesh of their legs bubbling and boiling away first, their last living sensation the smell of their own melting flesh.

'But why?' Bernice had asked the soldiers. 'They didn't do anything!'

'They allowed you to sully them,' one of them replied, eyes straight ahead, carefully avoiding hers.

'No they didn't!' Bernice protested. 'Take it from me, absolutely no sullying of any kind went on during the course of this trip.'

'Don't be absurd,' one of the others said. 'You're a man. Like all men, you're too weak to resist them.'

'Then punish *me*!' Bernice had said desperately.

But they wouldn't. She was a man, acting as came naturally. It had been up to the women to stop her. They would be the ones to face the most severe punishment, and all she would have to do was watch.

The night passed sleeplessly. For the first few hours she paced, backwards and forwards, like a caged animal. The guards sent her looks of increasing irritation but Bernice didn't care. What were they going to do to her, she thought bitterly, imprison her for another year and a day?

Eventually, they stopped her by the simple expedient of turning out all the lights. After that she just lay on the bed, soft and comfortable beneath her, and looked up unseeingly at the ceiling. By the time morning came, a dull grey light breaking through the window high up in one corner of the room, she felt light-headed from lack of sleep.

Not long now, she thought. They told me they'd be dead before lunch.

They brought her breakfast. It was a hearty meal, meat, eggs, assorted vegetables which had had any nutritional value pretty thoroughly deep-fried out of them. It didn't seem to occur to Bernice's guards that she might not have any appetite, that the imminent demise of the women she had supposedly seduced might in any way distress her. She took just one mouthful, but her mouth was too dry to swallow and she quickly spat it out again. Best to have an empty stomach, anyway, or she'd be losing the contents of it in public.

And then she was being led out, hands chained behind her back. She squinted her eyes against the suddenly bright sunlight. It took her a moment to refocus on the black blur around her and realise that it was composed of thousands of individual dots. Individual people, who had all come to witness the Emperor's daughters die.

They let out a roar as Bernice was led out into the centre of the vast arena a sound almost of approval. Grateful I've provided them with

their entertainment, Bernice thought bitterly, but the bitterness was mostly directed at herself. Why did she ever interfere? Why wasn't she more like Braxiatel, content just to observe? She liked to think she was taking the moral high ground, but if some outside observer were totting up the balance, would he decide that Bernice was doing more harm than good?

When Bernice was right in front of the execution pits, they undid her chains, as if to underscore her helplessness. What could she, one, unarmed person, do to stop this? Or perhaps they didn't for a moment imagine that she would try.

The crowd roared even louder when the girls were brought out. Absurdly, they were still swathed in their black robes, as if even in death it was imperative to preserve their modesty.

There were five poles in front of five fire pits, and one at a time the girls were brought up to them and chained against them with their arms behind their backs. Bernice noticed that a fair amount of slack was left in the chains. Probably so the crowd could enjoy seeing them struggle as they burned. The pitch of the audience's cries went up, almost screaming with anticipation now.

Straight ahead of her, in a box all his own, Bernice could see the Emperor. He was only fifty metres away, but she couldn't read his expression. His thin face was an impassive mask, as if this was just one more dull court ceremony he had to sit through.

After a while, the hubbub of sound began to subside into a tense, expectant silence. The Emperor looked around at the faces of his subjects, row after row of them, stretching back seemingly into infinity. Then, in an almost casual gesture, he raised his hand and clenched his fist.

A second later, the black pits beneath the five girls lit up. The flames barely registered against the bright, clear light of the day. Translucent squiggles of heat rose above them, heading towards the girls as if reaching out, keen to consume them. And then there was a harsh mechanical chugging sound and the poles to which the girls were tied began to descend towards the pit. The movement was so slight that it was almost imperceptible, prolonging the girls' agony as they awaited their death. Later, it would prolong the agony of the death itself.

Bernice's numb horror began to change, slowly heating up in concert with the rising flames into a scalding rage. The Emperor really was going to stand by and let them do this to his daughters. The crowd really were going to cheer and applaud and scream with pleasure as it happened. The soldiers, who had chatted so pleasantly with her as they locked her in her room, really were going to set fire to five perfectly harmless girls and then stand back and watch them

burn.

But Bernice was not, she realised, going to stand back and let it happen. Before she could begin to have second thoughts she stepped forward, straight towards the Emperor.

The crowd let out a shocked gasp, but there was a sort of pleasure in it. Something different, maybe even more exciting, was about to happen.

Bernice only stopped when she was close enough to see the Emperor's bright green eyes. 'You can't do this,' she told him. 'It isn't fair.'

He looked at her for a long time in silence. His face remained completely expressionless, but she thought she saw some animating emotion stirring behind his mask. 'It can't be stopped,' he said eventually. 'And it is entirely just.'

'But I didn't touch them,' she said. 'There's no proof that I did. Not a shred of evidence. There's been nothing even resembling a trial. It's probably impolite to point this out, but they're your daughters – don't you want to make sure they're actually guilty before you burn them to death?'

On their poles, she could see the black-cloaked figures twisting against their bonds to face her. The crowd let out a low moan, as if afraid that they could be punished even for overhearing that kind of thing.

But the Emperor showed no kind of reaction at all. 'When a woman is found alone, her face uncovered, with a man who is not her father or her husband, guilt is assumed. It's innocence which must be proven.'

The girls were getting closer to the flames now. One of them started to let out a choked, pained sound that was halfway between a sob and a scream. After a second, two other voices joined hers.

'Okay,' Bernice said. She took a very deep breath, but the air in her lungs felt stale, as if all the oxygen had already been sucked out of it. 'Okay, then. I'll prove it.'

She stepped back from the Emperor, put her arms to the bottom of the loose synthetic jerkin they'd given her to wear in her cell, and pulled it over her head. Underneath, she was wearing nothing but a plain cotton shift. 'If that's what it takes, I'll prove I can't have deflowered those girls.

'No!' one of the girls shouted. Bernice thought it sounded like Jesh. 'Stop it, you idiot!'

Bernice ignored her. She took the shirt off too, revealing a smooth, slightly hairy chest with two flat, male nipples.

Then she clicked open the hinges at the side of the chest, and removed that too. Freed from their long confinement, her breasts

swung proudly free into the air.

The expression on the Emperor's face was almost comical. He half raised a hand, starting some gesture he seemed to forget halfway through, leaving his hand flapping in midair like a landed fish.

Someone in the crowd shouted out, 'A mutant!' and elsewhere cries of 'Kill it!' started and Bernice realised that she was going to have to give them the Full Monty. Oh, well. Normally she'd expect at least a meal or a drink first, but maybe she could ask for that afterwards.

As quickly as possible she undid the clasp of her trousers, pushing them to the ground along with the complex prosthesis beneath them. This, she was pleased to see, stunned the crowd into silence.

The Emperor had by now schooled his face back into its previous impassive mask, quicker to understand what was going on than his subjects. Finally, he looked away from Bernice towards his daughters and completed the hand gesture he'd begun earlier. Startled soldiers leapt to obey, jerking the pulley that drew the girls back away from the pit. Another man leapt towards the instrument panel which controlled the flames, but Bernice saw that even before he reached it the flames blinked out with an audible whoosh of air.

She didn't have much time to think about what that meant because the Emperor had turned his vivid green eyes back to her.

'You know what this means, don't you?' he asked.

Bernice mustered a slight smile. 'Not really. But I dare say I could guess.'

The Emperor's green eyes followed her all the way out of the amphitheatre as the guards recovered from their shock and dragged her away. If Bernice had been less scared, she would have been amused to notice that they seemed torn between their desire to use their bodies to shield the innocent crowd from the sight of her naked body and their horror at the thought of touching that body themselves.

They didn't put Bernice back into the same luxurious cell they'd taken her from, but somewhere darker and considerably danker. When the door shut it left her in a grey twilight, the only adornment the black robe they'd thrown in alongside her with stern orders to cover her filthy body. Bernice resented that but on the other hand wasn't too keen on the idea of wandering naked for the rest of her probably short life. She compromised by putting on the robe but leaving the enveloping hood down. Then she sat down on the narrow, hard cot, and waited for whatever was going to happen to happen.

She only had to wait half an hour before the door opened again. For a moment, as the figure was outlined in the harsh light from outside the room and all she could see was its tall, stooped silhouette, she

thought that it was Braxiatel, improbably arrived just in time to rescue her. A moment later the door slammed shut behind it, leaving them both in the gloom, and she saw that it was the Emperor.

'You surprised me,' he said. 'I didn't think that was possible any longer.'

'I enjoy surprising people,' Bernice said. 'The public nudity I'm slightly less keen on.'

'Yet you endured it for the sake of my daughters.' His face looked pale in the grey light of her cell, somehow naked, much more human because of it. *He feels bad about what he's going to have to do to me*, Bernice realised.

'Not really,' Bernice said. 'Or at least, it wasn't really personal. What you were going to do to them was wrong, no matter who they were. And it was also my fault. I couldn't have lived with myself – and now I suppose I won't have to.'

The Emperor nodded. 'I see now how you were able to carry out your deception. You have the heart of a man.'

'But the body of a weak and feeble woman,' Bernice joked. Her smile slipped as she saw that the Emperor's expression remained grave. 'Which is the problem, I suppose.'

'Our law has no precedent for what you've done.' For the first time he smiled, a slight movement little more than a thinning of his lips. 'It's never happened before.'

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. For the first time, Bernice really thought about the Emperor as a man. Not in a sexual sense, though he did possess the primal attractiveness of the powerful. But as a person, someone who had the same sort of doubts she did, about whether he was doing the right thing, and how people saw him, and how history would judge him, and whether that red jerkin really did go with those purple pantaloons. On balance, she would have said not – but then she'd once worn a yellow polka-dot cocktail dress to an academic conference, so who was she to judge?

'Why did you do it?' the Emperor asked eventually.

'I told you –'

'Not revealing the disguise,' he interrupted. 'Why assume it in the first place?'

Bernice considered all sorts of elaborate lies, but none of them really seemed worth the effort. 'I'm from another system,' she told him, and he nodded, as if this was what he'd expected. 'A long way from here, so distant that most people I know haven't even heard of your Empire.'

His lips twitched wryly at that, and it occurred to her that no absolute ruler wants to hear of lands where his name isn't feared.

'I came to your world looking for someone I thought was here. She

probably was here, though I'm sure she's long gone by now. I knew something about the way you… view… women here, and I knew the only way I'd be free to carry out my search was disguised as a man. So that's what I did. It was never about spying on you or trying to undermine your society or some sort of botched assassination attempt or anything like that.' She shrugged. 'Sorry, I know it's not terribly exciting, but that's the truth.'

The Emperor leaned back, long elegant finger against his lips, assessing her. 'Then why did you join Dreash on his quest? Why did you marry my daughter?'

Bernice laughed; she couldn't help it. 'Because I have a talent for getting myself into ridiculous situations.'

After a moment, the Emperor laughed too. 'It would seem that you do.'

Bernice studied him closely. The mask seemed to have fallen from his face completely. She thought she might like the man who'd been hidden underneath it. 'May I ask you a personal question?'

He looked a little startled, but after a moment he nodded.

'I'm a woman, but you're talking to me as an equal. You seem perfectly willing to recognise that I've got a mind of my own. You're not stupid, and you're not uneducated, so why do you allow your society to continue treating one half of its population so utterly barbarically?'

Instantly, the mask was back in place. Bernice felt a shard of ice stab down somewhere between her shoulder blades as she remembered that this man had the power of life or death over a hundred billion life forms. 'You find us barbaric, do you?' he said expressionlessly.

Bernice bit her lip painfully, but she said, 'I find your social system barbaric, yes.'

For a moment she thought he might explode into anger, but then he seemed to sink in on himself, still closed off but behind a wall that seemed to be protecting him from the world rather than it from him. 'Well, you've seen the Cursed Lands,' he told her very quietly. 'Maybe when that equal intellect of yours gets working, you'll understand why we have to be the way we are.'

She opened her mouth to say something else, then closed it again when she read his expression.

'My people mean for me to kill you,' he said.

Bernice swallowed, but she wasn't surprised. 'Yes. I thought so.'

'You risked your life to save my daughters.'

'I did,' Bernice said. 'But I've found in life that good deeds seldom go unpunished.'

The Emperor leaned forward, so close that she could see the flecks

of gold in his bright green eyes. ‘I don’t want to punish you. But I can’t set you free either.’

‘Then what are you going to do?’

He took her hand. His was dry and colder than she’d expected, almost reptilian. ‘I’m going to ask you to marry me.’

Chapter Six

Hard to believe, I know, but there it is. My second wedding in three days. It might be some kind of record. What, you thought I was going to say 'no'? Be sensible, the man's intelligent, cultured, and certainly not hideous – and the Emperor of a star-spanning domain. By any sane calculation, he's quite a catch. Besides, he's the only non-terminal option available to me right now. Hey-ho, they've just arrived to fit my dress. Wouldn't have thought shapeless robes needed much fitting, but there you go. I wonder if I can persuade them to change the colour to white? I've always wanted a proper white wedding, and Jason doesn't really count.

Well, the dress doesn't suit me, and that's official. I would describe it but then it would be immortalised in prose, and take it from me, it doesn't deserve it. Oh, god. They're here to take me away for the ceremony. More later – I hope.

The ceremony took place in the same place as my first wedding – can we say déjà vu? Some old friends were there too, Dreash and Arbour and the boys, reunited with their brides and looking… well, shell-shocked actually. I caught Wishveel sending me some very unloving glances but he had to do it on the sly as I'm sure he realised it wasn't politic to be giving the Emperor's new wife the evil eye. I'd like to have known what the girls were thinking but swaddled up in their robes it was hard to tell. Jesh wasn't there at all, of course. Our marriage has been annulled – shame really, or I would have managed the unique feat of being married to a man and his daughter simultaneously – so she's an in-demand maiden again and therefore kept out of public sight. Wonder what quests she'll think up to put off her next batch of suitors.

I shan't bore you, dear diary, with the details of the wedding ceremony, as they were pretty similar to the first time, although this time I didn't have to actually say anything. Apparently my attendance alone indicated my consent and god forbid anyone other than my husband should hear my voice.

God forbid… Hmm, that's interesting. It hadn't occurred to me before, but not once have I heard anyone here invoking any kind of divine authority for the way women are treated. Unusual and intriguing. Of course, now that they know I am a woman, the chances of me finding out anything further are severely limited.

Anyway, back to the wedding. There were some muted mutterings from the crowd during the 'just cause and impediment bit' – interesting how many cultures have something like that – but no one

was likely to stand up and actually tell the Emperor he couldn't do exactly what he wanted. Also, I gather from some gossip I overheard… (Amazing how people will talk around someone who isn't allowed to talk back and whose eyes they can't see. In one of those robes you become object-like and invisible, which can be useful but is more demeaning than you could possibly imagine.) Anyway, from this gossip, I gather that the whole Empire's been rather worried about the Emperor's failure to produce a male heir from his previous wife, and his lack of interest in shacking up with anyone else despite the not inconsiderable number of offers he's had. Apparently he really loved Jesh's mother, and has been mourning her ever since she shuffled off this mortal wotsit five years ago.

I suppose I should feel honoured. And it would make a change to have a son who was actually, you know, wanted by his sperm-donor. Or at least wanted enough for said sperm-donor to stick around.

At exactly 12.47 local time, I found myself married. Again.

And then… Well, looking back on it all this time later, now I've finally been given the freedom to write again, it was the first week which was the hardest. Not the interpersonal stuff, strangely enough. Jodal – yes, the Emperor does have a name, and he allows me to use it behind closed doors – has never been anything less than gentlemanly. He expected me to perform my bridal duties, of course, but when my status as something less than a blushing virgin bride became apparent he simply cut his own hand to provide the necessary bloody sheets for the vultures waiting outside (even the Emperor, it turns out, isn't immune from that) and then got on with it.

The problem wasn't him, it was everyone else. I've been around oppressed people enough in my travels to know what that feels like; it was being so entirely overlooked that I found hard to deal with. If I spoke in the company of other men, they would politely ignore me, and then that evening I would get a gentle lecture from Jodal about proper behaviour, and what was expected, and how he needed to be an exemplar for the rest of his people and because he had, after all, saved my life, I did as he asked. After a month, I gave up trying to speak to men altogether, and just spoke to the other women instead.

Good Lord, that was dull. Allowed virtually no access to the outside, no chance to interact with it, their entire life was centred on the closed world of the Court. Gossip, backbiting, petty alliance forming, sniping, chipping away at people's reputations – I think an anthropologist once called these the Weapons of the Weak, and every single one of them was deployed against me.

They hated me. I was a stranger, I'd married a man many others had wanted and never been able to get. I'd known what it was to be free. I had a husband who didn't beat me. I can't tell you how many times, in

those little gatherings the women have, sitting around a pot of rose tea, faces uncovered in the absence of men, that I saw black eyes, bruised cheeks, sometimes broken limbs. I never came to the table with those things, and instead of blaming their husbands, they blamed me.

I told myself I shouldn't blame them for it, that they were victims of false consciousness, made this way by lifetimes of mistreatment, but you try being hated, all day, every day. It didn't take long for me to start hating them back.

It took over a year to win them round. And I couldn't help noticing that I did it by becoming more like them, not making them more like me. Slowly, so slowly I didn't notice it at the time, I was giving in.

And that's, in the end, how I found happiness. I didn't love Jodal when I married him but I slowly grew to and I know that in his own way he loves me. My life is… constrained, but in its own way it's satisfying. I've accepted my role as a woman, understood that there's a pleasure in giving up all responsibilities. Making decisions is so hard sometimes – I'm glad I never have to any more.

It's been seven years now. And I finally know who I am and where I belong. I'm the wife of the Emperor of Atwalla 3, and there's no better thing to be.

Oh, come on – only kidding.

I mean, it could still turn out that way – but I'm buggered if I'm going to sit back and let it. The wedding happened, of course, not much getting out of that, and the wedding night duties were performed – well, let's just say dutifully and leave it at that. Yes, I thought of Jason. I thought, 'What would Jason do, if he were here in my place?' And I could hear him explaining to me exactly why he'd ended up having to shag some princess…

Thankfully, Jodal (that really is his name) was then called away to perform some important affair of state or other, and I've been left alone with strict instructions not to leave the Palace. Which is fine – the Palace is exactly where I want to be. I'm sure that this is where all the answers are.

Not just the answers to the old questions, about why this place is the way it is. But the answers to some new questions. Because there's an image that's been haunting me for the last day, slipping into my mind whenever I let it drift: Jesh, walking away from us in the Cursed Lands, so far away we could barely see her, then lifting a hand to her face as if to stop herself saying words we'd never have been able to hear.

And there's another image, too – the flames that were to have burned Jodal's daughters snapping out of existence a second before

they were shut off.

I know they're important, I know they're connected, but unfortunately I can't quite figure out how or why.

Come on brain – work!

Still waiting.

Nope, it's no good. I need more input, more data. And I know just where to get it.

Goodbye for the minute, dear diary. It may be a while before I'm able to write in you again. And when I do, I may be writing the things I wrote before for real this time. But here's hoping not, eh?

* * *

Bernice snapped the book shut, the sound echoing hollowly round the Emperor's vast bedchamber. It was larger than any property she'd ever owned and contained enough gold and jewels to support her in the manner to which she was accustomed for the rest of her life. The bed alone could have housed a family of four. It would, she knew, drive her absolutely mad if she had to spend any extended period of time in it.

The idea of getting back inside the confining, stifling, depersonalising robe horrified her, but she knew she didn't have any choice if she wanted to leave the room. She slipped it over her head, wincing at the odour of stale sweat which was already beginning to hang around it. Charming.

She was about to leave when she saw something, a flash of green in the far distant corner of the room. It was one of the seedlings from the Cursed Land – carefully potted, its troubling, fleshy leaves looking plump and healthy. Bernice knelt down to study it, fascinated once again. She could see that the plant was covered in tiny thorns, but when she leaned closer to inspect them, she realised that each was made out of something other than wood, a white translucent substance which looked rather like fingernails. When she reached out a tentative hand to touch one, she felt a slight resistance – and then, more than that, she felt the plant pushing back.

She knelt on her haunches a long time, studying the thing, but she knew that the answers wouldn't be found in the seedling itself, not without the sort of high-spec biotech equipment no one here was going to give her access to.

Seedling secreted beneath her robes, she strode out of the bedchamber as confidently as she could manage and marched away down the corridor in a direction chosen pretty much at random. The guards outside spun round to face her, opened their mouths, and then closed them again – not quite ready to challenge the Emperor's bride. Or maybe Jodal had instructed them to give her this freedom. He'd told her he wanted her to be happy.

She just hoped that stretched to giving her the run of his private library.

The Palace corridors were full of people, busier than she'd remembered, soldiers and courtiers and a few other women like herself. At first, she jumped at every chance encounter, feeling the prickling of watchful eyes between her shoulder blades. But after a while she realised that no one was paying her the slightest bit of attention. Of course, there was no reason why they should. In her shapeless robes she was entirely anonymous – just a woman, her identity and individuality unimportant.

Unable to ask for directions, it took her almost an hour to find the library in the Byzantine maze of the Palace. She'd almost given up hope when she turned from one near-identical gold-plated corridor to another and suddenly saw the dark, verdigris-stained copper doors ahead of her, the embossed face of the Emperor on each, eyes as big as her head. There were no guards on the doors and when she cautiously pushed against them she found that they were unlocked. They creaked alarmingly when she pushed them open, but no one was around to hear so she let them clang shut behind her, then slipped into the welcoming semi-darkness of the room.

All her life, she had found the presence of books a comfort. She inhaled the scent of them now, that dusty muskiness that in any other context would have been unpleasant, but here spoke of age and wisdom. She took a moment, eyes shut, to absorb the peace, then walked to the bookcase where she had previously found the most useful volumes.

It only took her a few moments to determine that they were no longer there. At first she assumed they'd just been moved, but a quick scan through the library's index system, its stores of word cubes and racks of scrolls, showed her that every single volume which contained any reference to Atwalla's ancient history, its Before Time, had been removed.

Bugger!

Her new husband obviously understood her better than she'd imagined. No wonder the guards hadn't bothered to follow her. She supposed she was lucky that he'd at least allowed her access to the library, but it felt too much like the kind of titbit one threw to a captive animal – a compensation for freedom lost, a sop.

Still, he might understand her, but he didn't know her. Academic discovery wasn't just a matter of looking something up in the index and turning to the correct page. She'd sometimes – admittedly in her more wine-soaked moments – thought that it resembled nothing so much as hunting. You had to stalk your prey, stay downwind of it, approach it from an unexpected angle.

Unexpected. Hmm…

Bernice sensed a flicker of inspiration somewhere in the corner of her mind's eye, but experience told her it was just as likely to sputter out as grow into anything more illuminating. Using a technique she'd first developed in her student days, when it had had more to do with ignorance than any kind of lateral thinking, she raced around the room, footsteps echoing hollowly on the cool tiled floor, pulling volumes from the shelves at random and piling them up into a teetering stack in her arms.

Then she threw them onto the table and just looked at them, like a soothsayer examining a pile of animal bones and with pretty much the same intention. *Flora and Fauna of the Creesh Archipelago* lay on top of *Blaster Maintenance for Dummies*. *Premodernism to Postmodernism, a Paradigmatic Deconstruction of Ancient Fairy Tales* – good lord, that sounded like the kind of thing she'd have churned out when she was desperate to get tenure – sat beside *Atwalla on my Mind – A Childhood Remembered*. *The Chronicles of Grelsh* and *Profits Before Prophets* were partially obscuring a book whose title appeared to be *Ooks Spoil the Bro*. The –

Hang on a second.

Fairy tales, fairy tales – what was it old Professor Williams with his tangled beard and seldom washed armpits used to say about fairy tales? Suddenly, as clearly as if he were standing beside her right now, she could hear him saying: 'What dies in history, lives in legend, and the stories we tell to children often contain truths we are no longer able to face ourselves.' He had, Bernice remembered, been eloquent as well as smelly.

Feeling a rising excitement, she threw aside all the other books and pulled the study of fairy tales in front of her. It wasn't much use itself – well, it was postmodernist, what did she expect? – but it gave her all the pointers she needed to find the source material itself. The library, it turned out, contained over 500 different volumes of children's stories.

Bernice picked out ten of them and took them back to the table. They all looked equally promising but she liked the cover of a two-centuries-old anthology – wicked looking pixies turning what appeared to be a pig into what was almost a man – so she looked through that one first, starting at the back for no particular reason.

The first story was no use, just your standard foolish prince spending his inheritance and learning kingly virtues the hard way. But the next she found hinted at what she wanted, a magical story of unwanted transmutations, all thanks to a woman's careless invocation of a fire demon. And then she came on the third. She read it once. Then again, very carefully. The third time, she took notes.

It was only a short story.

'King Kersh of Atwan, ruler of the Lands of Men,' it said, 'was very sad, because his kingdom was small, and his people were few, and his weapons were weak, and all around him were kingdoms bigger, and more populous, and stronger than his own, and every one of them wanted some piece of his kingdom for themselves, so that soon there would be nothing left for him or his people.

'To the north lay the Caliphate of the Centaurs. They were a warlike people, archers of great renown, and their Caliph swore that they would descend on the Land of Atwan and with their flame arrows they would burn its villages and its people to the ground.

'To the south lay the land of the Frost Giants. They were a fierce people, quick to anger and slow to forgive – and many centuries ago they had suffered a great defeat at the hands of Men, when Men had been more numerous and more powerful than they were in these desperate days. Their king had sworn a dreadful oath to avenge that long ago wrong on the people Atwan.

'To the east lay the Empire of the Ogres. The Ogres loved death, and intended to bring it to every man woman and child in the Land of Men. And to the west lay the land of the mysterious Spirits, about whom little was known, except their terrible judgements on all mortal life.

'King Kersh knew that if he did not act, the corpses of his people would be piled in the streets of his cities, and the green fields of his land would be sown with salt. First he entreated the Caliph of the Centaurs, offering him gold if he would leave his people in peace. But the Caliph laughed, for the cities of the Centaurs were paved with gold, and they valued it no more highly than rust.

'To the Frost Giants he offered food, the fatted calves for which the Land of Men was famed. But the Frost Giants ate only sunshine and clouds, and they went on with their plans for war. To the Ogres there was no speaking, so the King sent round his miners, with every jewel they had ever found hiding in the earth, but nothing came back to him save the miners' bones, with all the flesh gnawed off them. And the Spirits took the wineskins he sent them, filled with vintages 500 years old, and worth more than their weight in gold or jewels, and they pierced them with their long claws and let the wine drain out onto the ground, where it looked very much like the blood of Men.

'The King despaired, and when his four daughters, whom he loved more than anything in the world, begged an audience with him, he sent his guards to bar them, for he did not wish them to see him in this dark mood. But they would not be deterred. "Father," they said, "there is one last thing you may offer that may still save our land from war."

“Beloved daughters,” he replied, “I have offered them gold, and I have offered them jewels, and I have offered them wine, and I have offered them the fatted calves for which this kingdom is famed, but they wanted none of it. Now I have nothing left to give save the blood of my people, and that I fear will be freely spent soon enough.”

“Father,” said his youngest daughter, who was also the bravest, and the wisest, “you are mistaken, for there is one last thing you have not offered them, something which is more precious than jewels, or gold, or fatted calves, or fine wine.”

“That is something I can never give!” cried the King, for he understood his daughter’s words.

‘But his daughter would not be deterred. “My oldest sister Kreya, the apple of your eye, shall marry the Caliph of the Centaurs,” she said, “for he is a handsome fellow, although not human, and it is said that he might be kind. My sister Freya, famous for her sewing, shall marry the Lord of the Frost Giants, for it seems to me that they may be in need of warm garments, and thus may Freya earn their love. My twin Dreya, only one hour older than me, will marry the Emperor of the Ogres. As you know, her eyes have always served her poorly, and she will not see his ugliness and so may grow to care for him despite it.”

‘“And you, Seya,” the Emperor said in despair, “my youngest and most beloved daughter. Who will you wed?”

‘And his youngest daughter, though she was filled with fear, held up her head high and declared, “I shall marry the Grand Inquisitor of the Spirits, for I know that my heart is pure and surely he can find no evil within me.”

‘Then the King put his head in his hands and wept, for he knew that his daughter was right and that this was his only choice. For ten days, he prepared their wedding band, determined that if his daughters were to do this terrible thing, they would have everything they could desire with them. He loaded their bags with dresses studded with pearls, and he filled their hampers with the finest pastries his 21 pastry chefs could bake, and he sent each a tiny monkey in a cage, to keep them company on their long journey, and then he could delay no longer and it was time for his daughters to depart.

‘For 51 long days he waited, with no news of his beloved girls, while his armies gathered on the borders of his kingdom waiting for the onslaught which would destroy them all.

‘Then, on the fifty-second day, a messenger came over the border from the East, a second from the South and a final messenger from the dark North. The first message was from the Caliph of the Centaurs, who told the King that after long reflection he had decided to take his armies elsewhere, for he could not make war on the people of his

beloved and most beautiful new bride.

'A message from the Lord of the Frost Giants told of the wonderful new and warm garments which had been made by his new wife, and through which the humans had more than atoned for their long-ago crime. There would be no war there. Nor with the Emperor of the Ogres, whose tears had splashed onto his message, which spoke of his joy at being granted the hand of the one woman in all the world who found him handsome.

'The King read out these messages to his people, and there was great rejoicing in the land, and his people sent up prayers for his daughters, who had sacrificed so much for them.

'But the King still awaited the fourth message, the message from the Spirits of the West, to whom he had sent his youngest and most beloved daughter. For ten days he waited, and on the tenth day the message came.

'Oh, King of Men, the message said, in the strange script of the People of the Islands of the West, *I thank you for sending me your youngest and most beloved daughter, whose heart is without sin and who is therefore acceptable to me as my bride. And in return for your kindness, I will give you this prophecy: the destruction you hoped to avert you have brought on yourself. For your eldest child will soon bear a son to the Caliph of the Centaurs, who will be neither man nor Centaur but something in between.*

'Your daughter Freya is already heavy with the son she has made with her husband, the Lord of the Frost Giants, a son who will be the size of a man, with the unnatural cold about him of the Giant kind. Terrible to behold will be the girl who springs from the loins of the daughter you have married to the Emperor of the Ogres.

'And my own offspring, more unnatural even than myself, already grows in the womb of your youngest and most beloved child. And these children will bear children, and those children children, and in time there will be no race of Man, but only this half-breed people, who are made of all the races of the world, and belong to not a one of them.

'And then the King cried out in a great voice, beating his breast and tearing out his hair, for he understood what his daughters had done.'

* * *

'Now do you understand?' said the voice of someone Bernice hadn't even heard entering the library but instantly recognised as Jesh. When she turned around, Bernice saw that the other woman was uncovered, her thin slightly hawkish face looking more peaceful than she'd ever seen it.

'I think I do,' Bernice said – and as she said it, she understood even more. The images which had been hovering, out of focus, at the back of her mind, suddenly snapped into sharp focus: Jesh, in the Cursed

Lands, walking away from them, hiding her mouth, because she was sending a message to her father to tell him where she and the other girls were, even though she must have known it would lead to her death; the fires beneath the doomed girls snapping out of existence a moment before they were switched off, teleported away Bernice now saw, a rescue attempt that she had inadvertently rendered redundant.

'You ruined all my plans,' Jesh told her in the sort of calm voice people used both when they were genuinely calm and when they were terribly angry. 'If you hadn't helped those other fools to complete their quests so quickly, before everything was in place. If you hadn't revealed yourself to my Father, we could have been spirited away, and no one would ever have known we weren't dead.'

'I'm sorry,' Bernice told her. 'If it's any consolation, I was acting with the best of intentions.'

Jesh smiled at that, though the expression looked a little strained. 'Apologies are easy. Actions are hard.'

Bernice nodded. 'Fine. Then what can I do to make it up to you?'

Jesh smiled again, more genuinely this time. Then Bernice felt a strange internal twitch, and like the Cheshire Cat's, Jesh's smile began to fade into thin air, only after a second Bernice released that it wasn't Jesh who was fading but her, and then the library and its dusty, musty smell and all its books were gone entirely and Bernice was standing in the teleport lounge of a small interstellar vessel.

The creature facing her looked like some kind of walking octopus, its skin fluctuating wildly in colour and texture, like a television which wasn't quite tuned in. The tentacles that circled its face opened wide when it saw Bernice, reaching towards her, and she took a startled step back.

But then a sound emerged from the creature's mouth which after a moment's concentration resolved itself into slurred but comprehensible Galactic Standard and Bernice realised that it had only been preparing to speak.

'Greetings, human female,' it said. 'I wish no offence, but would be most grateful if you would consent to breed with me.'

Chapter Seven

‘That’s, well, that’s an enormously tempting offer,’ Bernice said, eyeing the nearest slightly slimy tentacle as it waggled through the air towards her. ‘But also a biological impossibility. Unless you’re using “breed” as a euphemism for something else, in which case – help!’

She backed away as far as she could, which wasn’t very far given that she’d been teleported into what appeared to be a small broom cupboard. The creature regarded her with an expression that looked like puzzlement, but could just as easily have been amusement or uncontrollable homicidal rage.

‘I thought you knew,’ Jesh said, and Bernice realised for the first time that the other woman had been transported along with her. ‘You were reading the right books in the library – didn’t you understand what they meant?’

Later, in the grand atrium at the centre of the ship, roof open to the light dusting of stars which scattered the sky so far from the galactic core, Bernice said, ‘I do understand.’

Jesh nodded, gingerly sipping a drink which their hosts had assured them had been biometrically matched to human dietary requirements but not, alas, those of taste. The other girl was looking more casual than Bernice had ever seen her. Both her face and lower arms were uncovered, but she was wearing a tense, defiant expression which suggested that the new dress code had been chosen to make a point rather than for comfort.

Beside her, the alien called Thiss was flashing repeatedly from lilac through yellow to red and then back again. Further back in the room, keeping a discreet distance from Bernice and Jesh, the remaining crew members were undergoing similar chromatic transformations. Bernice had absolutely no idea what it meant, but was finding it extremely distracting.

‘Your people were desperate,’ Bernice said to Jesh. ‘Surrounded by more powerful enemies, weak – they were on the brink of destruction.’

‘That’s no excuse,’ Jesh said firmly.

Thiss loomed over her, tentacles gently thrashing, apparently interested in the conversation. Bernice saw one of the tentacles around his mouth brush gently against Jesh’s arm, and she flinched away. Then, with an almost visible effort, Bernice saw her relax, force herself to maintain the contact. But as soon as she relaxed, Thiss seemed to realise what he was doing, where his tentacle was resting, and he snatched it away equally uncomfortably before going through the

exact same process as the human girl, visibly relaxing himself sufficiently to accept the contact. The two then sat there, spines stiff and tense, faces carefully nonchalant, bodies quivering with tension. Something very odd going on there, Bernice thought, and she was beginning to guess what.

Jesh seemed to become aware of Bernice's scrutiny and tensed – if it was possible – even further. Bernice looked away and shook her head. 'Excuses and reasons aren't the same thing. It's funny, your father told me the answer when I first met him, but I didn't listen.'

Jesh looked away and Bernice could see that this mention of her father pained her. She wondered if the other woman loved him at all, or if after years of oppression she had nothing left to feel except resentment.

'Your father said that fighting or marrying were polar opposites, the two ways different peoples can interact. Fighting wasn't working for your ancestors, so they chose the other option.'

'Some of them chose it,' Jesh said, 'others of us weren't given the choice.'

Bernice shrugged. 'Maybe. I suspect it was a mutual decision, though. Back then, the battle of the sexes hadn't really been declared. Whoever had the idea, I have to say it was a brilliant one. Genetically engineer the females of your race so that they become cross-fertile with any other species, anyone at all. And the level of science required – I saw the cast-offs from it in the Forbidden Forest, or early experiments, or maybe by-products, who knows, and I didn't even recognise them for what they were because it didn't occur to me that anyone would be able to achieve that. Stunning, unprecedented really, in this galaxy anyway. So, like the fairy tale said, your ancestors finally had something to offer that their enemies wanted – fertile wives.'

Jesh's fingers were clenched so tightly around her goblet that Bernice could see the tips of them whitening through the glass. 'For a brilliant idea, it didn't work out too well, did it?'

'Well…' Bernice said. 'Depends what perspective you take. Scientifically, it was flawless. And your people *were* saved from annihilation. More than that, they quickly became the dominant local power – it's amazing what a few useful allies will do for your intergalactic status. And it's amazing how much easier it is to be allied to someone who's married to one of your daughters.'

'Until you meet your grandchild,' Jesh said. Beside her, Thiss's skin twitched from leathery roughness to nodular smoothness.

'Yes,' Bernice said. 'Until then. Miscegenation. It's an ugly word, and an ugly idea, but it must have become the dominant thought in your people's mind. They suddenly realised that they'd given

themselves the power to breed their race out of existence – to bear children who were half-Atwallan and half something else, grandchildren with a quarter of your genes, great-grandchildren who were barely Atwallan at all.'

'Still, they found a way to solve the problem, didn't they?' Jesh said. 'They found a very satisfactory conclusion.'

Bernice closed her eyes a moment, remembering the Cursed Land, the devastation, the endless bodies beneath the glass. 'Can we still call it genocide when the victims belong to every race and species imaginable.' She opened her eyes to find Jesh's burning into hers with the same fire, the same anger.

This, she realised, was what the other woman couldn't forgive her father for: not her own circumscribed, repressed life, but the fact that he had learned of this long ago terrible act and had looked away. He had seen what Jesh and Bernice had seen, and instead of crying out in horror, he had never spoken of it, and he had continued to do everything in his power to maintain the society which had perpetrated and sprung from that ancient atrocity.

'Yes, we can call it genocide,' Bernice said slowly. 'I think we can call it that.'

'Better to be dead,' Jesh said. 'Better to be dead and buried than to live the way they forced us to live. The men of Atwalla killed their half-breed children, but they buried their women alive.'

'They had to,' Bernice said, holding up a hand to forestall the other woman's protest. 'If they cared about miscegenation, and even their fairy tales show that they did, then the only way to prevent it was to lock their women up so tight that no alien man could ever get to them.'

'Except,' Jesh said, and now Bernice heard a note of bitter triumph in her voice, 'no one can ever lock another person up that tight, not forever.'

'And you did find an alien man to breed with,' Bernice said, finally turning to look fully at Thiss. His tentacles were thrashing gently, as if he'd sensed where this conversation was heading. 'Do you really think you can?'

'Of course,' Jesh said, 'you know I can – I was designed that way.'

'I know,' Bernice said, still looking at Thiss, the strangeness of him, the boneless tentacles, the chameleonic skin, the multiple eyes, each one watching her intently, carrying a tiny image of her in its dark centre. 'But can you? Really?'

Jesh blushed, a quick scarlet flush of colour in her pale cheeks, and for a second looked every bit as young as her years. Then she seemed to get hold of herself, setting her mouth in a straight line, straightening her shoulders rigidly, as complete a transformation as

any Bernice had seen Thiss undergo. ‘Yes,’ she said, looking at Thiss now, ‘I’ve said I will, and I can.’

Bernice turned to Thiss. ‘And what about you? I don’t wish to be indelicate, but what are you getting out of this? I don’t believe you can’t find a single woman of your own species who wants you, not a fine specimen of bioctopoid life like yourself. Don’t get me wrong, Jesh is a very attractive woman – if you’re a human. To you I imagine she looks utterly repulsive.’

Thiss’s skin bunched and darkened, suddenly looking like worn rubber, and Bernice knew that she’d hit a nerve. ‘I would never describe her as repulsive,’ he said with careful tact.

‘But why?’ Bernice persisted. ‘Why would you want half-breed children?’

‘Because,’ Thiss said quietly, ‘that is all I will ever have.’

He looked – inasmuch as it was possible to tell – suddenly distressed, and Jesh reached an instinctive comforting hand out towards him, which hovered a moment in midair as she became aware of what she was doing, then carried on more deliberately to firmly clasp his thick middle tentacle.

Thiss studied her hand for a very long time with all eight of his eyes before turning them back to Bernice. ‘We are of an ocean world. My people are a people of the water – and when the water is poisoned, so are we.’

‘Poisoned?’ Bernice asked.

Jesh hung her head, her hand dropping Thiss’s, but it was she who spoke. ‘My great-grandfather. The pacification campaign of 905. The Empire’s army spread an antichloroplastic agent in the seas to drive Thiss’s people into the open and force them to sue for peace.’

‘I don’t believe they knew what the effect would be,’ Thiss said in a heavy voice.

‘But they didn’t care either,’ Jesh said hotly. ‘They don’t set out to cause pain, my people, they’re merely indifferent to it.’

‘They certainly were indifferent to our suffering,’ Thiss said and this time he reached out a tentacle without hesitation and brushed her hand. ‘But you, you were not indifferent.’

‘It sterilised you,’ Bernice said. ‘The poison they put in your oceans.’

Thiss jerked his head in a motion that she guessed was his equivalent of a nod. ‘Sterilised, but not so directly. The Z chromosome we males carry rendered us immune to the toxin for reasons we do not yet fully understand. But the females of our kind…’

‘It wiped out every female of your species?’ Bernice said incredulously.

‘Every last one,’ Thiss said. ‘Some lingered. The death was not quick, or kind. But the last died thirty years ago. Since then, there

have been no children. And my people are dying. They were without hope – until Jesh came to us, and told us that there was a way.'

Jesh turned to Bernice. The shame in her eyes had been replaced by her old fury. 'I found out about what my ancestors did to Thiss's people when I was reading in my father's library, trying to understand why my world is the way it is.'

'And you found that they were linked,' Bernice said slowly, thinking it out. 'The toxin was derived from something your men had been developing to use on their own women, the nuclear, last-resort option.'

Jesh's eyes widened. 'I didn't find that out. But you're right. Of course you're right. Which makes what we're doing even more appropriate.'

'But is this really what you want?' Bernice asked Thiss. 'You know that the children you have with her won't be just your children, they'll be hers too. Your race might survive, but it will never be pure again. Your people as you know them will still be gone.'

Jesh glared at her, but Bernice didn't back down. Better for them to face the truth now, than later when there was no going back and Thiss might take out his disappointment on Jesh, might start all over again the terrible cycle which had played itself out once already on Atwalla.

She thought of Peter. Even on the Collection there were people – only a few of them, granted – who made his mixed parentage an issue. The same people who could find something wrong anywhere. The same people who had driven Clarissa away.

But Thiss didn't flinch away. He reached out one tentacle, a long thin one which writhed gently like seaweed on the shore, and tapped Bernice in the middle of her chest. 'Your people are so strange, to think that you-ness is the how-ness of your looks. It is not that I want my race to continue – who thinks of race, of peoples? I want children. I want to be a father. Thanks to Jesh, I shall be – and thanks to you, another of my people can know that joy too.'

'Erm,' Bernice said. 'Thanks to me?'

'You stopped my plan to rescue my sisters.' Jesh said, looking at Bernice with absolute resolve. 'Thiss's people have four fewer potential mothers because of you. The least you can do is make up some of the shortfall.'

'I'll help you rescue your sisters,' Bernice said carefully. 'I absolutely promise you, I'll do everything in my power to rescue the women of your planet from the appalling slavery they've been reduced to. But I simply can't have sex with Thiss or any of his other people. Not to mention that if I married one of them, that would make my third wedding in three days and a girl really can get a reputation.'

'You'll find you can do anything,' Jesh said, in a voice that wasn't

quite threatening, ‘if you have to.’

‘Except change the laws of biology,’ Bernice insisted. ‘Don’t you understand? I’m not one of your people. The things that were done to them, weren’t done to me. I could try to conceive a child with Thiss till the, I don’t know, sea urchins came home, and it would never happen.’

‘Oh,’ Jesh said.

Thiss turned all eight eyes on her, a fire burning in their depths which seemed to scorch away the reflected images of her and leave nothing but flame. Bernice wished very much that she could read his expression.

Later, locked in the tiny cabin they’d assigned to her, Bernice found herself remembering the seedling, the one she’d secreted beneath her robes when she left her bridal bedroom what felt like a very long time ago.

She took it out now and looked at it, for the first time finding it beautiful rather than troubling. ‘You’re something that never should have existed,’ she told it, not worrying too much that she was talking to a plant. She still didn’t know what exactly Thiss planned to do with her now that he’d discovered that she not only knew his secret plans but was of no use whatsoever to him. And, as the wife of the Emperor whose daughter he’d just kidnapped, she was in a position to betray those plans to quite literally the worst possible person. Very carefully, she closed the door in her mind that led out onto all the possible future paths that sprang from that piece of information, and concentrated on the seedling instead.

‘You’re something entirely unique in the universe,’ she said, gently stroking one of its plump, fleshy leaves. The leaf curled itself affectionately round her finger, and she smiled. ‘Not many things can say that.’

The door to her room hissed open with a sound like wind in a seashell. ‘Although your child will be one of them,’ Bernice said to Jesh as she entered.

The other woman took an unconscious step back, and Bernice knew that she still had doubts, whatever she might have claimed.

‘So, coming to throw me off the ship into the vacuum of space? Because if you are, I should warn you that I can in fact breathe in a vacuum.’

Jesh frowned. ‘Can you? I thought you were human-type normal.’

Bernice sighed and nodded. ‘I am. I was just hoping if I told you that you’d try some other less lethal way of killing me. It worked for Brer Rabbit.’

‘We *are* getting rid of you,’ Jesh said. ‘But not lethally. Thiss agreed

to let you off at the nearest neutral world. We're just docking there now. I told him you won't betray us to my father. You won't, will you?'

Bernice shook her head. 'Of course not.'

'Who *are* you?' Jesh said, studying her closely, not moving from the doorway or letting her past. 'Why did you come to our planet and do what you did?'

'I didn't mean to,' Bernice told her. 'I meant to do something else entirely. But I find that's how most of my life happens to me – when something else is supposed to be happening instead.'

They didn't speak again till they reached the airlock, which Bernice was amused to find resembled the mouth of one of Thiss's people, waving tentacles and all. She'd always thought that architecture was the most narcissistic of all the art forms. Thiss and some of his men had come to see her off, or maybe to make sure she left, but they hung back, allowing Jesh to say goodbye in some privacy.

Bernice tucked the seedling under her arm, turned towards the airlock then turned back to Jesh, grasping her arm so hard that she felt her fingernails scrape the skin till they drew blood. Jesh winced but didn't pull away.

'Are you sure?' Bernice asked. 'Are you absolutely certain?'

Jesh looked round at Thiss, his tentacles gently weaving, his skin a mottled and unhealthy-looking puce, then turned back to Bernice. 'Thiss is the first person in my life who's ever given me a choice,' she said. 'And this is the one I'm making.'

Chapter Eight

When Bernice returned to Atwalla, fully rested and with clean fingernails, she hitched a ride back with a Shenian buccaneer ship. Thiss, understanding her aim, had offered to take her back himself, but Bernice wouldn't risk that. He and Jesh had got away. However her brilliant plan played out, Benny at least had that in the bank. The Shenians weren't strictly legal but on the plus side they did have a very well-stocked bar, and their teleport was second to none. Good enough to snatch the cargo from a container ship half a light year away.

Certainly good enough to set her down where she wanted without anyone noticing.

The library seemed larger at night, as if the darkness was pressing against the walls and pushing them back, opening up more space for itself to fill. Bernice sat in the corner furthest from the door, among the cookery books and the language instruction manuals. There was no sign of the Emperor, so she switched on one small table lamp and sat in a globe of light in the ocean of black, reading about the best way to pan fry sligwraith liver and wondering what exactly a sligwraith was and whether it really would taste better in a light blatterwort sauce.

She didn't realise she'd fallen asleep until the sound of the door opening startled her awake. She could tell that the Emperor had seen her immediately by the way he paused in the doorway, swaying backwards on his feet as if he was considering running out and summoning the guards. But he seemed to decide against it, and after a moment he strode towards her, footsteps echoing hollowly in the vaulted spaces of the room.

When he was still twenty feet away from her, she took the vial out of her pocket and held it out towards him. 'I'd stop right there if I were you,' she said.

He was close enough for her to see his eyes, narrowed in an expression that might have conveyed extreme anger if the rest of his face hadn't been so perfectly calm. 'You're a wanted woman, you know. A death sentence, but not the easy death you would have had if I'd killed you when I first had the chance.'

So it was anger, then. Well, she'd stolen his favourite daughter away from him – what did she expect?

'Is that any way to speak to your wife?' Bernice said.

He took a threatening step towards her and she saw that he now held a very small laser pistol in his hand.

She waved the vial she was holding warningly. 'I really would

advise you against doing anything rash with that. The trouble with killing people is that they tend to fall over. And the trouble with glass vials is that they tend to break.'

His green eyes glittered fiercely at her, disbelieving, but he didn't come any closer. 'And what exactly do you have in that vial that I should be so afraid of?'

Bernice leaned back in her chair, tipping it back on its legs to rest her own against the leather surface of the reading table. 'Well, you know what they say about marrying in haste and repenting at leisure? There are a few things you probably ought to have found out about me before we tied the old knot.'

His mouth thinned but he didn't say anything.

Bernice smiled. 'Although I imagine that's already crossed your mind. For instance, you might have liked to know that back home I have access to genetic technology that makes your own ancestors look like bungling amateurs. And it would probably also have been useful for you to have found out that I have major problems with a society that oppresses women the way yours does. Also, I would think, the fact that I don't tend to sit back and let things that I have major problems with continue to be major problems.'

He was clever, she'd give him that. A tyrant who was prepared to perpetuate and run a system which oppressed even his own daughters, but clever. 'You've created a cure, a cure for the women,' he said. 'Even our own scientists were unable to do that, long ago, before their art was lost. They never intended the process to be reversible.'

'Well, it is,' Bernice said.

Now he did take another step towards her, excitement in every line of his body. 'Give me the cure.'

Bernice shook her head. 'I can't.' She curled her hand tight around the vial. 'I don't have it. And don't come a step closer!' she snapped.

He slowly placed the foot he'd lifted back on the ground, but continued leaning towards her, as if some invisible force were pushing him forward. 'Are you trying to torment me? Were you able to make a cure or not?'

'I was able to, I simply chose not to. It's all about choice, isn't it? The women of Atwalla had theirs taken away from them a very long time ago, and I decided that I didn't want to be just one more person making their choices for them. So no, I didn't make a cure.'

The Emperor folded his arms, and in his face there was a hint of amusement along with the exasperation. It occurred to Bernice that he might perhaps have genuinely liked her, been motivated by that as well as gratitude to marry her, and that part of his anger now might be born from a sense of betrayal. But she refused to feel bad about what she was doing.

‘So what is in that vial?’ he asked.

‘Well,’ Bernice said, swinging her legs down from the table and leaning forward so that there could be absolutely no mistake about what she was saying. ‘It is a virus. A very virulent one, as it happens, but it isn’t coded to affect women. This one is targeted only at men.’

A slow look of horror began to crawl over the Emperor’s face, and for the first time he took a step back.

‘Yes,’ Bernice said. ‘I think you understand. This was much easier to design than the cure, because it wasn’t about reversing the original process – it was about imitating it. If I release this, the men of Atwalla will become exactly like the women. Cross fertile with every other species in the galaxy.’

She saw that the Emperor understood, but she carried on anyway. She’d been waiting two weeks for the chance to say this. ‘Imagine if you could mate with any other species in the galaxy, not just in this tiny little sector of space that you and your tin-pot Empire rule. Imagine how popular you’d be with those other races if they knew you could destroy their genetic purity.’

‘You wouldn’t do it,’ the Emperor said, his voice suddenly as dry as dust. ‘If you did…’

Bernice nodded. ‘If I did, there’d be another genocide on this planet pretty damn soon.’

He took another step away from her.

She smiled. ‘There’s no point, you know. It’s a virus – there’s nowhere you or your people could go to escape it.’

‘What do you want?’ he asked quietly. The green of his eyes had paled to the colour of a dying leaf. ‘Money? I can give you money, wealth, more than you ever knew existed.’

Bernice shook her head.

‘Power then,’ he said desperately. ‘I could make you my wife in more than just name. You could rule by my side, as my equal. You could have the power of life and death over a hundred billion beings. More. With your knowledge, my Empire could grow. Between us, we could control half the galaxy.’

‘I’ve never wanted that,’ Bernice told him. ‘That’s the difference between us. I’ve never wanted control over anyone but myself.’

As if all the energy had drained out of him, the Emperor suddenly sank down into the chair behind him, muscles slackening in defeat. ‘Then what do you want?’

Bernice felt a flash of triumph, and a moment later was sickened. Maybe she was more like him than she could acknowledge. ‘I want you to make some changes around here. Half your population is enslaved. Free them. Tell them the truth about themselves and let them make their own choices.’

‘But you know the consequences of that,’ he said despairingly. ‘They’ll leave us. They’ll breed with others, and my people will be gone.’

‘Maybe,’ Bernice said coldly. ‘If they all left you I wouldn’t blame them. But I think you’ll find some prefer the company of their own species. And if you have any doubts about taking the risk, you can always remember the alternative. I can come back at any point and release this if I discover you haven’t been keeping up your side of the bargain.’ She held out the vial of virus towards him. The orange glow of the table lamp shone through it, turning it the colour of flame.

When Bernice could see in his face that he really had understood and accepted that he had no choice she lifted the teleport link to her face and prepared to recall herself back to the safety and copious alcohol of the Shenian ship.

A second before she could press the button, she hesitated and turned back to the Emperor. ‘Oh, one last thing. I did some research on Atwallan history while I was away. Just for my own amusement, you understand. And I discovered something rather intriguing – a history that’s been hidden from the men of your planet as well as the women. You see, I discovered who the real natives of Atwalla were – and they looked nothing like you or your people. It seems like the cross-breeding was already well under way by the time your ancestors decided to put a stop to it. The genetic purity you’ve asked your women to sacrifice so much to preserve was never that pure in the first place.’

And then she pressed the button and teleported away. The last part of her to fade was the hand holding the vial of virus. The Emperor sat for a very long time, staring at the space it had occupied in the air.

Parallel Lives (II)

By Simon Guerrier

‘We received the DNA samples,’ said Braxiatel, meeting her at the spaceport. They made their way out of the building and across the perfect lawn in the direction of her apartment. The Collection seemed quiet, calm – Vosta’s Day celebrations had come to an end. And only about a month after they’d started. Another couple of weeks, though, and it’d be Liberation Day. ‘Yes, it’s got all the blueprint we need.’

‘I’ve got the seedling with me, too,’ said Bernice, gesturing at the paltry luggage she was carrying. ‘That should help. If we do actually ever need the virus.’

‘We’ll monitor events. That was very well done, Bernice.’

‘Bluffing comes easy once you’ve played Jason a few times at strip poker.’

‘A detail I could have lived without.’

‘Sorry.’ They continued across the grass, the day cool but clear. A group of students were playing some kind of all-against-all version of football. Or was it rugby? Something that involved lots of running about and jumping on each other, anyway. ‘But you’ve not come to tell me how clever I am, Brax. What do you want?’

‘Ah…’ he said. ‘There’s been a complication.’

Bernice stopped. ‘You heard from Clarissa?’

‘In a manner of speaking, yes.’

Bernice didn’t like the sound of this one bit. ‘And?’

‘I think she’s been running you something of a dance,’ he said. ‘She disappears just before you’re due back from Etheria. And then, the moment you go after her, she turns up here again.’

‘She came back? Maybe it was just a holiday she wanted…’

‘I’m afraid I don’t think so, Bernice.’

Bernice shook her head. She wanted to get home, to get out of the clothes she’d been travelling in for days, to wash, to change… to see Peter. Obviously Brax had other ideas. What new assignment was it this time?

‘Go on, then,’ she said.

‘We think she just wanted a longer head start,’ he said. ‘For you to have more of a handicap. That’s the best interpretation I have.’

‘She’s gone again?’

‘Yes. It was only a fleeting visit. She’s taken a few things. A few things that are precious.’

‘What, artefacts and stuff?’

‘If only,’ he said. ‘No, things, I think, of a little more value. Ms Jones has a particularly good understanding of our security arrangements here.’

‘You don’t think –’ Bernice began. But she stopped herself, because clearly he did. ‘What does she know?’

‘The general gist of, well, everything really,’ Braxiatel admitted. ‘And before this latest jaunt, she’d helped herself to some schematics and plans showing things we haven’t even put in place yet.’

‘But who could she offer those to?’

Braxiatel stopped walking. He gazed back at the cavorting young people, smiling, she supposed, at their complete lack of cares.

‘Who are we worried about?’ she prompted.

Braxiatel closed his eyes and opened them again. ‘The Nekkistani, possibly The Martians almost definitely – Hass has a brother who could soon cause us trouble. The Draconians want this part of space “returned” to their sovereignty. The Galyari will get involved in anything. I even hear rumours of Earth making a comeback on the galactic scene. Then there’s the various communities of Phaidon, Monan, Grellor, Barampa, Arbivatroocius and Mim… Need I go on?’

‘I didn’t realise things were that bad.’

‘They’re not. But they could be. And Clarissa has… her own insights into how it all works out.’

‘What’s that meant to mean?’ Bernice snapped. But, in asking, she had the answer. It explained so much – the lack of family, friends, history. She’d always been a mystery, and Bernice had assumed she was keeping her past secret. But it wasn’t the past she’d been hiding at all. ‘She’s from the future, isn’t she?’

‘It’s possible,’ said Braxiatel. ‘Bev and Adrian are already on her trail.’

‘Well, then,’ said Bernice, shrugging. ‘I could do with a rest. Do you know how much running about I’ve done in the last few weeks?’

‘There’s something else,’ he said. ‘Something else she took with her.’

‘Don’t tell me,’ said Bernice. ‘She’s pinched your address book.’

‘No,’ he said. Again, he wouldn’t look at her. Across the lawn, one of the students had scored some kind of goal. This action seemed to warrant the confiscation of his trousers, but the student had enough arms to keep his teammates away. Almost.

Bernice watched, laughing despite herself and the proper example an eminent professor ought to convey.

Braxiatel, however, wasn’t laughing. ‘I’m sorry, Bernice,’ he went on. ‘She took your son.’

Hiding Places

Stewart Sheargold

Chapter One

Bev stood at the window, and looked out to sea. It swelled and crashed against the shore, wave upon wave, remorseless, uncaring, brutal. She felt it inside too, had been feeling like this for days now, felt the tide rising within her, felt it slowly come to the level of her eyes. Drowning her in memory. She had endured the blackness behind her eyelids, unseeing, unknowing, for minutes only. She had never been one to find comfort in delusion. She faced the threat head on. She rolled her hands into fists. She fought. But this wasn't something that was so easily subjugated. This was her, turned inside out, ripped, raw and bloody, for all to see. For her to see. The beam from the lighthouse smothered everything.

She was not going to turn around.

'Please,' said the voice.

'No,' she snapped, and winced, realising the acknowledgement. Things would begin now. Ignore them, she thought; ignorance is bliss. I do not want to know.

'I'm not leaving,' the voice said calmly.

She wouldn't speak, wouldn't speak, wouldn't give words to this person. It only made them more tangible, more sympathetic.

She fingered the long knife in her hands. Scraped at the blood drying on it. It flaked off onto the floor; she watched the red fall. The violence rising in her was becoming difficult to suppress. The colour brimmed beneath her eyelids, violent as the sun. It was not her violence but she loved it.

There was a small boy playing with a dog on the beach. At least she thought it was a dog, though something about the spindly shape was wrong. Bev watched the boy and was frightened at the immensity of the sky that dwarfed him and the vast, endless sea that crashed and grasped. The black dog ran along the wide strip of beach. The boy laughed at its antics. The boy laughed. The boy? There was something about a boy she should remember. A tear slipped down her cheek. Everything was wrong, muddled.

'You must talk to me. You owe me that much,' said the man behind her.

'I owe you nothing,' Bev replied bitterly, but she knew that was not true. 'Apart from your freedom.'

Bev bit into her tongue, drawing blood.

The boy on the beach laughed again. The sound echoed through her. 'You've already done it once…' said the man and touched her on the shoulder.

The waves crashed on the shore.

The boy laughed.

The red spilled over in Bev and she turned quickly and easily slid the blade into the already-dead man's gut. She repeated the movement. Over and over and over. Until she was pleased with all the red. Then she stopped.

There was a moment of silence.

He looked her in the eye. 'There. That was easy, wasn't it?' he said.

The waves crashed on the shore.

There was a wolf out here among the sand dunes. Adrian had tracked the small paw prints across the beach, sifting them out through the driftwood and oceanic debris, like a careful beachcomber searching for precious shells. They led him to the rock pools at the very end of the beach, and the sheer cliff face of jagged black rock that curved around the promontory and made a bed for the disused lighthouse atop it. Here, they stopped. Adrian growled in frustration and, straightening from his hunting crouch, he scanned his surroundings for any sign of slight movement.

The beach stretched away behind him, a wide sash of white parting the glistening blue sea from the esplanade and the strip of buildings running the length of the sands. The hotel where they had rooms was the centre of attention in the lacklustre street. It was an old building with a vast, gaudy façade, painted holiday-pastel pink. It would have been imposing, he thought, with its crenellated tower and two wings either side, were it not for the decay appearing manifestly around the edges. He'd walked far up the white sands and it dwindled in a heat-haze in the distance now. He drew a paw across his forehead and frowned at the sun overhead; it was uncomfortably hot, 'especially for him. He almost wished he had begun to moult. It would certainly labour the wolf. Odd that it should show itself during daylight, he mused. But then he wasn't after the wolf.

Ahead of him lay the rock pools. They glittered with star-bursts of sunshine, a patina of sheen to cover their secrets. He wasn't interested in them. The wet, slippery rocks were dangerous, and any tracks would have been washed away by the waters. He looked up at the lighthouse looming vertiginously above him like a terrible omen. The wolf could not have doubled back as he tracked it, it could only have gone one way. Up.

Cursing, Adrian made his way across the sharp stony rock, trying to be nimble and quite frequently failing, breaking the skin of pools as he slipped, scratching his shins. When he got to the stair in the cliff face he breathed an evident sigh of relief. He had never been one for water. He did not trust it, had no control over its fickle embrace.

The stair up to the lighthouse was hewn and bolted into the rock,

though parts seemed very loose and ready to shear away in a strong wind. The lower half was slimy and crusted with barnacles and Adrian wondered, worrying, how far submerged the stair became at high tide. But the sea was calm and placid today, its blue washing listlessly ashore, satiated with all the lives in its belly.

He climbed. He did not look up at the lighthouse. The stair swayed with his heavy bulk, and he grasped the rusty rail tighter. At the top he paused, and smiled. There was a sandy paw print on the topmost step.

On the cliff top, the world seemed completely changed. The vastness of the sea so overwhelmed him that he had to take a step back. Its blue challenged him; it moved incessantly with countless slithering forms. To his left was the town and the esplanade, its buildings bright and yet seemingly still faded with an age they could not polish. Adrian explored it from this vantage point, gleaning the lay of the land; he always felt more comfortable when he could encapsulate his environment in his head. He smiled wryly. lust like a builder,' Benny would have said. He suddenly had a pang in his stomachs, and hoped she was all right, wherever she'd raced off to. He'd seen so little of her these days, closeted as she was in her rooms, or off-planet, or with… Jason. He was losing touch with her, though at least he knew her regard for him was higher than he'd thought. Even her love? But that was a tricky place and he could become lost there; so little experience with that environment.

I could disappear here and nobody would ever know where I had gone, he thought. Would they even miss me? The flat moorlands behind him vanished into endlessness. They beckoned. He liked the idea of vanishing. He shook himself from such maudlin thoughts and turned to face the lighthouse.

It stood stolidly just back from the cliff edge, rising impressively into the blue sky, a beacon exclaiming, Do Not Come Here. Windows punctuated the three conical divisions, letting shafts of light in to illuminate the structure as it threw its light out. But it was dead now, the light broken, and had no other purpose than to impotently forebode a danger that it could not tell. No ships came these days, so Henrietta had told him. None from the sea, anyway. He rattled the door but it was locked. The townsfolk mindful of vandals, he presumed; or curious Killorans, said a suspicious part of his mind.

He bent to check the ground, but the paw prints did not lead to the lighthouse door. They led off into the wilderness, and he was not going to become lost in that unknown. The wolf would eventually return, and, hopefully, the boy with him. Where could they be hiding?

The boy. Peter? He had seemed so like his son. The animal laugh. The broad physique. He had only caught a glimpse last night, the

beach dark and untrustworthy, but instinct had told him to run after them. He had dashed from the hotel into the night, his footfalls no doubt waking everyone… But when he reached the beach there had been no sign of the boy or the darting shape about his legs that had been the wolf. He'd sat down on the sand and closed his eyes for a moment, breathing deeply, the sea's fingers reaching hungrily for him. When he'd looked again Bev was sitting next to him. She frowned enquiringly. 'I saw him,' he'd said. She understood immediately. 'Don't worry. One of us will find him. And *her*,' she'd stressed through gritted teeth. She'd placed a hand on his forearm.

There was gentle cough behind him. He tensed.

'I'm afraid that the key has been lost for many years,' said a man in a rich, clipped and slightly censorious tone.

'Henry.' Adrian acknowledged him gruffly without turning. 'I didn't hear you on the stair.'

'And in any case, it is rather dangerous inside, everything is fallen into disuse and ruin.'

Adrian turned now, and gazed at the man standing on the edge of the precipice, dressed in an immaculately cut black suit, the cuffs sitting just so on his wrists, pearly cufflinks glinting in the sunlight, the crisp, starched shirt collars underlining his rather severe, ascetic face; his black hair was swept across his head ruthlessly, compact as a cap. His slight smile gave just the right tincture of obsequiousness to cover any mockery. Adrian bristled.

'The light doesn't work, you see,' Henry continued, inclining his head as though speaking to a child who may not understand.

'I was curious,' Adrian replied.

'Naturally. All the strangers are.' His smile widened a little, cheeks cutting crescents into his long face. 'But we know what curiosity does, don't we?'

Adrian frowned, unsure whether he was the brunt of a particularly sophisticated joke. Abandoning any sense of politeness he grunted, 'What are you doing here? I thought you didn't leave the hotel.'

Henry flinched at such brutish indecorum. He gently tugged at his cuffs to avert his agitation. 'I believe Ms Tarrant would like to speak with you.'

Adrian laughed, the sound a bellow on the cliff top. 'Well, that's service for you.'

Henry smiled unctuously and gestured with a rust-free white glove to the stair.

Adrian hesitated for a moment, took one last quick look around him for signs of disappearing wolves or boys, but seeing nothing reluctantly acquiesced to Henry's rather pressing invitation.

Bev sat at a table on the terrace, tapping a fork against her wineglass, and waited impatiently for something to happen. Since arriving in this seemingly benign town, she had experienced an ineluctable sense of inertia. It was beyond what anyone might describe as boredom. It was as though the hotel and its occupants were stilled in the set of a distant decade. Time and history flowed around them all here. Indeed, the entire town sat in a crook, a hinge of land that folded in upon itself. The cliff at one end with the lighthouse atop it, the esplanade fading into the inviolable distance, the other. Everything was just too close and stultifying.

They had landed in the sea. Their small spacecraft skimming the surface of the waves like a thrown stone before coming to rest just short of the beach. So much for a subtle entrance, she had thought and admonished Adrian for his flashy piloting. Ms Jones would probably be halfway to the next planet in the Phylox chain after hearing the sonic boom of their retro jets. Peter under arm. Wading ashore, she had watched with some apprehension as the craft rose fitfully into the sky, dripping streams of water like a behemoth rising from the deep, and retraced its course back to the mother ship they had hitched a ride on. She felt for the remote beacon in her pocket now and was comforted by its solid weight and assurance of escape.

She was, she had to admit, beginning to doubt Brax's intelligence regarding this place. Did it even have a name? They hadn't found a single trace of Clarissa or Peter. No one knew or had seen a thing. The only indication of anything amiss was her instinctive feeling that something wasn't quite right here. The beach was pristine, the waters blue as a paradise, the sun warmed and invigorated the skin. But the town itself was sterile and lifeless, decay leeching in, the sea ever eager to stroke at stone and slowly, lovingly devour. She was becoming increasingly annoyed with herself for not being able to place the unnerving feeling of wrong.

But now… a possible lead. Adrian had sworn he'd seen this boy on the beach in the night. Bev was doubtful. How much of that was his anxiety manifesting? Adrian wasn't exactly what she'd call delusional but she was sure he had been affected more than he let show by Peter's kidnapping. She'd come to realise that he wasn't a mere brutal animal, despite his very convincing physical likeness to one. His love for Peter, for his son, was evident in his worry, and was a very disarming quality in such a beastly form. He was being strong for them all.

She'd found herself wondering why she had relented to help; was it because she was gaining a newfound respect for Adrian? He had saved her life – twice, selflessly putting himself in danger for her. They did make a good team, though his methodology differed demonstrably

from hers. She was beginning to feel safe with him around. And that, she knew, was a precarious feeling to have when your line of work dealt in danger and mayhem; and when your partner had emotional issues. She did have some idea of what Brax had required when she'd agreed to inhabit the role of his 'PA'. And he did pay her a small fortune for it, too, which was better than nicking art from the walls of excessively secure galleries. Better than… She gulped down a bad memory.

And just where the bloody hell was Adrian? She'd knocked on the door of his room and there had been no answer. When she'd picked the lock the only sign he'd been there was the rumpled bed and the slightly musty animal scent that pervaded the room. If he was off investigating without her, she'd be extremely ticked off.

'Beverley, isn't it?'

She was startled rudely from her reverie and turned awkwardly in her chair to look over her shoulder. A small elderly woman stood at the glass terrace doors smiling inquisitively, poised.

'Yes. It is,' replied Bev, somewhat guarded.

As though she had been waiting for this affirmation, the woman flitted quickly across to her. 'It's Henrietta, dear. We met on the stairs. I'm actress. You'd lost something. May I take a seat?'

Bev blinked rapidly to combat this tide of information, though having handled many of Brax's business deals she was hardly going to be flustered by this. 'I know. We met when I arrived. I haven't found him yet, but I will. just about to have lunch with someone.'

Henrietta looked pointedly around at the empty tables, and then at the decidedly vacant seat opposite Bev. 'Well, he's not here yet.' And she pulled out the chair with an unfortunate scraping squeal on the stone, and sat in it. Her smile broadened. Bev frowned.

Henrietta was one of those actresses who was used to getting her own way, and brooked no argument; no doubt a diva in her day. She was also one of those actresses who regaled everyone they met with their tedious tales of behind-the-scenes shenanigans. Her tone when she told these stories was of an almost pitiable desperation. Bev surmised any star power she had once claimed had long since faded. Henrietta nevertheless was clinging to her theatrical façade: her cheeks were rouged with blood-red circles on white powdered senescent flesh, her eyes rimmed heavily with kohl, a red bob wig sat precisely on her head; there were gaudy rings on her fingers and the stones flashed colour in the day, all of this accented by the simple black pant-suit she wore. Her eyes twinkled wickedly, self-importantly in her face. She must have been at least seventy.

'Not where I would have chosen for a holiday,' she said sniffily, 'My agent, you see. Wanted me to take a rest. I'm a workaholic. I'd work

27 hours a day if I could. Have to these days, what with all those younger actresses getting all the parts… and royally screwing them up! And then I have to train them!' She cackled. 'Have you ordered, yet?'

'No,' said Bev. She put down her fork. 'I don't know where Henry is.'

'Slacking off again, no doubt. Out the back with a cigarette. Just like us girls in the productions. Always missing stage calls. Why there was a time…'

'Holiday?' Bev interrupted, knowing this might go on interminably if she didn't. 'Why did your agent choose here?'

Henrietta was not at all perturbed by being cut off. 'Text book, sweetie.' Bev raised an eyebrow.

'Sun, sand, water, hotel by the beach, lazy days, utter serviced luxury. It's all in the handbook as the best place for a prescribed rest.' She picked up the other wineglass and looked longingly at its emptiness. 'So they tell me.'

Bev leaned forward on her elbows. Thinking she was about to impart some exciting gossip, Henrietta also leaned in eagerly. 'Why was it prescribed?' asked Bev, not really all that interested, just teasing.

Henrietta's reaction was immediate. She sat back fast in her seat, eyes narrowed. She'd picked up the knife and was rolling it between her thumb and forefinger, rather too expertly Bev noticed. 'No reason,' said the actress primly, 'I'd simply accrued too much holiday leave.' She paused briefly and a flicker of doubt crossed her face. Absently she muttered, 'So they tell me.'

Bev thought it might be best to curb that line of questioning. 'So how long will you be staying?' she asked in as bright a tone as she could manage.

Henrietta looked at her as though seeing her for the first time, then mechanically placed the knife back on the table. She beamed. 'Oh, no time at all, dear. I'm leaving very soon. Yes, back to the film stages… I'm shooting a new movie with Magnus Carter, you know… when they get the contracts signed…'

Bev tuned out and turned to look at the sea. It was a calm day but the wind had picked up and a few white breakers curled and slapped far out. She smiled when she recognised the figures walking up the beach. The hulking form of the seven-foot Killoran dwarfed poor Henry. They both looked incongruous on the white sun-drenched beach, a beast in paradise, and Henry dapper and dressed to the nines in his immaculate black suit. She realised how glad she was to see Adrian; for an instant there she had wanted to leap up and run down the beach, to get away from Henrietta, she was sure, or to reprimand

him for having left her at the mercy of the guests. He'd seen her watching now and waved. She studiously ignored it and he cast his eyes down. Bev frowned. It seemed, to her, that Henry was herding him back to the hotel.

She gave her attention to Henrietta. She wouldn't let him know how pleased she was to see him. '… and of course he can play every instrument that has ever been made,' she harrumphed. 'And did so in that play of his, now what was it called? Forgettable affair but very good score, as you'd imagine.'

Suddenly seeing an opening where she might actually contribute to the 'conversation', Bev leapt in. 'I can play quite a few instruments myself, actually.' She watched Henrietta's appliquéd eyebrows go up. 'They're very easy to learn.'

'Really, dear?' she said in an obvious challenge.

'Yes,' replied Bev, steadfast. She'd found the actress's weakness. And Bev, happily, was an expert in playing one-upmanship parlour games.

There was a short pause. Foot steps on the terrace stairs. 'I believe Henry has a Dagellan Violin.'

'Really?' said Bev in the same devastatingly calm tone. 'I'm particularly good at violin.'

'Perhaps you could play it?' Henrietta arched an eyebrow. 'Entertain us,' she continued with a doubtful smile.

'I'd love to.'

'Love to what?' asked Adrian panting heavily behind her.

She did not turn around, but kept smiling at Henrietta. 'Love to discuss what you've been doing all morning, Adrian,' she replied in an aggrieved tone,

'Over a much-delayed lunch.' She inclined her head at the actress who graciously stood. Adrian shook himself roughly, beads of sweat flying from his fur, and then sat.

'How about tonight, then, Beverley?' suggested Henrietta.

'Perfect.'

'Excellent. I'll arrange it. Henry? Come with me.' She walked away, humming in victory, or perhaps in mockery of Bev's supposed talent. 'Excuse me,' Henry apologised, following.

'What have you just done?' asked Adrian, thoroughly confused.

'I,' she began, 'have just managed to start something that might shake things up a bit around here, and that can only be a good thing. And now at least we'll have an excuse to intermingle with the guests without making them suspicious of us. Your gruff detective routine isn't exactly getting us anywhere.' She swallowed nervously and looked him in the eye. 'Though it does mean I shall have to give a small violin recital.'

Adrian was shocked and simultaneously impressed. 'I didn't know

you played.'

Bev shrugged. 'Yeah, well, it was inevitable. After all these years of stealing art and artefacts, a bit of culture was bound to rub off.'

Lunch had, oddly, been a quiet affair, with Bev finding herself reluctant to discuss anything with Adrian while they could be overheard by Henry, who was ever present at their table under the excuse of catering speedily to their every whim. Adrian could see she had something on her mind and simply waited until she was ready. He tucked hungrily into his steak and chips, despite their manufactured taste. They had eaten the entire meal silently, and Bev's discomfort at having Henry near grew more evident. Finally, when the manager had asked them if they'd wanted dessert, Adrian had declined for both of them, suggested they take a walk, and had practically dragged Bev from her seat. He'd had to tell her about his morning on the dunes.

'A wolf? It seems a bit unlikely, doesn't it?' Bev shaded her eyes and frowned up at Adrian. 'Not to mention dangerous.'

'He's half-Killoran,' explained Adrian, matter-of-factly.

A natural affinity with the bestial, thought Bev, and remembered what Joseph had told her about Peter and the time ring business. She was frightened at such incongruous violence in a small, vulnerable boy. But that was partly what she saw when she looked at Adrian – a giant, sturdy wall (pun entirely intended) of physique; claws, somewhat blunted by hard manual labour, broad shoulders, a brutally thrust-out chest of hard musculature, that flat-eared and heavy dog's head, covered all over with bristling, ragged fur. No matter how hard she tried there was just something so alien about Adrian that kept him isolated from her white skin. Perhaps she was becoming xenophobic. And yet she had cross-pollinated, as it was generally known, before, and had no problems with it. Perhaps it was his connection with Benny that made her uneasy. And yet there was a thrill in her at the very promise of Adrian's anger, his potential for ruin and damage. What was in her that wanted such a thing? She looked into his eyes.

His eyes were a deep brown, and sorrowful, and held all his doubt and anxiety. They were human.

'So where did it go?'

'Off into the moors, I think,' he said, and turned away, perhaps embarrassed at his failure.

'And you saw Peter with it?' She made her voice steady, capable.

'Only last night,' he paused, 'In the dark,' he added weakly, realising how his argument sounded.

Bev sighed and stopped walking. She kicked dispiritedly at the wall that ran along the esplanade, stone flaked off. 'Well, at least it's something,' she finally admitted.

Adrian lifted his head, and, eventually, smiled. ‘I can track it again,’ he said. ‘Yes, well…’ she started and then sighed again.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘He’s your son, Adrian. Don’t you think he’d come running if he saw you?’ The Killoran frowned his way back into beastliness. ‘And after all the trouble she took to take him, where exactly is Ms Jones in all this?’ Aware of how she was bristling at him, and then frustrated at finding herself becoming deliberately delicate toward him, she turned away and glanced at the row of shops and fishermen’s cottages huddled together for safety against the sea’s hard elements. In the butcher’s window opposite, the meats glistened red and wetly, speaking of murder and the grotesque hacking of sharp implements.

‘Then he didn’t see me,’ Adrian replied decisively.

He is delusional, she thought angrily. ‘Or, it isn’t Peter.’ She let the direct statement hang. Adrian’s teeth were gritted, but she could see he was slowly coaxing himself to agree with her.

‘We still have the wolf…’ he said, and his tone inspired some hope in the situation.

‘They’ve either been and gone, or they’re hiding themselves very well,’ she rationed. ‘And if they’ve gone, they must have left a trace somewhere, despite no one having seen a thing.’ She snorted disbelievingly at that.

‘You think Henry and Henrietta are lying?’ asked Adrian, narrowing his eyes, readying his anger.

‘I don’t know. There’s certainly something not right here.’ She waved at the cottages, silent and glistening in the sun. ‘I mean, this should be a popular seaside resort, according to Henrietta.’

‘So?’ Adrian shrugged listlessly.

‘So, where are all the people?’

Adrian looked about himself. The esplanade was empty of any sound but the low moan of a sharp wind, their own footsteps, their lone voices seemingly magnified in the stillness. The sea was a dense, stifling blue; wave upon wave crashed ashore, striving to touch the sand. The lighthouse atop the cliff stared down impassively; the town swept off into an obscure distance, rippled with heat-haze. ‘Perhaps it’s not the tourist season,’ he replied, trying to shake a feeling of unease.

The hairs on the back of his ears pricked up. Without seeming to, he quickly searched the landscape for a sign of worry. In the centre of the street stood the pink tasteless façade of the hotel. As his eyes passed over it he shivered at the many windows that stared constantly down at him. His senses were so finely tuned that he always knew when he was being watched.

Bev noticed his agitation. She tensed imperceptibly. ‘What is it?’ She

was good; he thought he'd hidden it from her.

'Someone's watching us. From the hotel.' She did not turn to look, merely; continued to stare out to sea. She walked to the esplanade wall and leaned casually against it.

'Of course they are,' she replied candidly. 'It's the only place here that's inhabited.' She laughed slowly. Adrian liked the genuine sound of it. 'Always go for the antique that seems the most gaudy and obscene, as it's highly likely it's the one which is worth more.' She cocked a smile at him. 'Universal law.'

And with that smile, he was filled with a vigour that suddenly buoyed his mood. They would find Peter. Bev believed it. He would too. They would discover exactly what Clarissa had done while on this world, maybe even why, she had run. Though he could sympathise with her intense feelings of alienation after the war, he could never understand how she could have taken Peter. He was avoiding thoughts of her, of what he'd do when he saw her again. There was a line that he could cross, and he would fall through all the layers of his evolution and become primitive, base and animalistic once more. He'd learned to measure out his anger until it had all but evaporated into a gruff but generally calm countenance. There had been days when he couldn't have constrained his behaviour even if he'd wanted to. Days when he ran on instinct and anger alone. Days of war. Those ingrained feelings threatened to rise in him again; she had taken his son, his blood. He felt less than whole, a piece that fitted so naturally in his everyday suddenly lost. He thought he understood Benny a little better now after this, and why she'd felt the way she had about Jason when he was on trial for his life, as though he'd be taken away from her, never to be touched again. That ineluctable biological bond. Still, it was hard to feel sympathy for Jason in any form, considering how ridiculous a man he was, with glaringly obvious faults. Even Bev could hold more ale than he could; she was a better class of person all told than that clowning, unwashed… He stopped himself. He thought of the smile on Benny's face when he brought back their son.

The sun dipped low over the sea in its diurnal round, bringing a somnolent afternoon glaze. The light flared on the water like a promise. Everything is better because of the light, he thought. Bev was gazing at him gently but inquiringly. She did not press him though, and he was glad. 'We have audience,' she said. Then, remembering: 'I wonder if I can borrow Henry's violin to practice for my audience tonight. I'm a bit rusty. Haven't played in years.'

'I'm still rather impressed you can play,' Adrian admitted.

She frowned at him and demanded, 'Why?'

Seeing she expected an answer, he composed himself and said, very carefully, 'It, ah, just doesn't seem…'

‘Yes?’

‘In character with an art thief and mercenary PA,’ he finished.

Bev was silent for a moment, and he thought he’d blown it, forcing her back into her strict, serious mood. ‘I think you’ll find,’ she said with an edge, ‘that I’m a woman of many hidden talents.’ She turned to him to show she held no animosity, but she shook her head in gentle exasperation all the same. Her fringe fell back revealing her scars. He wanted to put his hand out, to touch her…

He followed her up the esplanade back to the hotel.

Jacob sat stone-still on the floor and dreamed all the rooms of the hotel. It was a game he liked to play, conjuring them from what he had seen and remembered. He was a solitary boy who barely ventured into the sun; his skin was pale as a grubs, his fingers finicky with incessant movement. He liked this room, and brought everything he partook of back here. Here, he felt secure from prying eyes, here he could divine things from the world about him using his intuition and his extreme imagination. So he dreamed away his life in this small box. When he wanted to discover what was happening outside the square, he would dream the rooms of the hotel. Each one would pass into his memory like a shape seen through mist, not yet defined, and then, as he filled in gaps with his imagination, they would become fuller, more whole. Sometimes he could actually see better when he divined things this way than with his own wide green eyes. He could influence the room, he could shift and shuffle the furniture, blow a loose page of paper from a table when there was no wind. The feeling was intoxicating.

He had been aware of a change in the hotel’s mood. For a week, whispers had started to grow around corners. Of course, Henry and Henrietta were always conspiring, ever eager for some entertainment in their dullish existence. But this had been different. The rooms seemed to actively court gloom, swallowing up light as though conscious of an approaching harm. The ferns in the courtyard wilted and browned. Something passed through the hotel.

Then the strangers had come.

Even closeted as he was, he could not have failed to hear their brash, flashy entrance. They had instantly intrigued him, and he had reached out. He had searched their rooms, his mind painting a picture-perfect image. It runnelled and bled slowly into view, overlaid on his own four walls. Every person left an imprint on a room – like a poster patch-marked a wall after a time – whether they had inhabited it for years or stood inside for merely minutes. The stronger the personality the more heavily the imprint would lay. Jacob fell these layerings – emotional wallpaper, as they were. It was part of the

experience that made it so enjoyable and enlightening. He thought vaguely that it might be some latent psychic ability within him, but kept this only as a loose idea in his head, as he was far too romantically inclined to invest it with scientific rationality.

There had been a lot of conflicting images from these two. A great deal of suppressed anger (the walls had changed to reveal tumbling, crumbling masonry, an echo of gunfire rippled throughout the room, black hulking shapes moved in fog) and then a terrible pall of guilt washed these pictures away (the walls shifting and flickering to show a darkened, modern hall economically decorated with paintings, a sudden lurching rush, a golden ball outheld like a talisman, running, running). And while he had been searching their rooms, sifting and sorting through their psychological detritus, another single picture appeared smokily on the surface of his own room, intermingling. Jacob had frowned. For that to happen there had to be some connection. He had reached out and taken the simple image, turned it about. It was from a room at the top of the hotel. It was an image of a mature, greying woman with glasses and a small broad-shouldered, furry child. No matter what he did he could not make the picture reconcile with the strangers. There was a story to be made here and in it he saw his escape. He had smiled, and for the first time in a long while his curiosity had been so piqued that he had prepared to leave his room. He would talk to them and see if that would give him the same amount of pleasure.

He stood up and opened his eyes. The hotel snapped sharply into existence around him.

Chapter Two

The music bloomed from bow-ridden strings, a melancholy lament that suffused the dining room and stuck under the cornices. The bow arced up and down. Bev had told him she would choose something simple without dramatic spiralling crescendos, but Adrian found himself amazed and affected by her performance. She may have claimed to be 'rusty', yet she held the oddly shaped bow with an expert's finesse, and dipped it occasionally to make use of the jutting side-bar, gently teasing another string to broaden the note. She'd called it a *tangen*, a particular to the Dagellan violin, apparently, and purportedly difficult to master.

The music was intensely beautiful. It seemed to swell and flow throughout the room, making it glow, parting the gloom, pushing down through the furniture, running along his veins. His hairs were standing on end; he was tingling all over. Was it merely the music, or was he receptive because Bev, his friend, was playing? He wondered what she was thinking to make her music so potent with unstable, perceived grief. Yet there was a great joy in it too as she plucked a shiver of sprightly notes with the tangen. He'd never been so… besotted and impressed.

Her bow slowed in a signature change, and he felt pressed into slow motion along with the music. He looked at her. Her eyes were closed, a frown of deep concentration on her brow, she burrowed herself, head down, into the music, keeping safe from scrutiny. Despite this reticence, the quickness of her bow was evidence of some fulfillment.

The others seemed as affected. Henry sat close, elbows on knees, head moving imperceptibly at each of her strokes, trying to interpret when her next note would come as though he wished to devour the sounds. His eyes were wide on her. Henrietta sat just back from him, legs crossed in an uncomfortable posture, lips pursed with displeasure at being trumped by Bev's apparent skill. Nevertheless, Adrian caught her smile once or twice, and her hard eyes softened in reminiscence. The music pushed déjà vu through them all, as though it had the power to unwrap memory. Bev had bewitched them all.

Adrian felt something tug at his insides. When he realised what it was he became suddenly anxious. His heart pumped fast. It was a feeling he usually associated with Peter… and Benny. He took a few deep breaths to settle himself. It was just the music. Yes, it was just the music. It drew his attention back to the violin, to the glitter of notes in the air, to Beverley.

She'd been nervous. She hadn't been sure if she could go through with

this. It had been such a long time since she'd even picked up a violin. All those years of privilege ago. But it was like anything, once you learned you never forgot, it was always there in a back drawer of memory. What she'd told Adrian had been a glib lie. She hadn't just 'picked up' violin, though she had practised enough to add her own personal flourishes of style. She had been taught, as part of her education. Another accessory for a successful society lady to own: a gifted daughter. When Henry had reverently offered up the violin to her, soon as she'd felt the slickness of the wood, the slim hardness of the bow, she'd wanted to smash it into splinters on the floor. She was frightened at the residue of that anger and hurt. But as soon as she'd placed it under her chin and clasped the base of the scroll length, she felt the music whole and unbroken within the instrument. Henrietta had smirked unkindly at her, that had decided Bev. She had placed the bow gently on the strings, balancing it so as to measure the weight of the tangen and adjust it accordingly. Looking up she had seen Adrian standing stalwart in the shadows, and his very presence gave her confidence. She had taken a deep breath, and played.

In the midst of an arpeggio she glanced up and realised that she held complete control here. Every eye was fixed on her, as though she were the centre of everything in this building. She bloomed with a sudden strange fervour that was not entirely her own. It ran like electricity through her and she found herself playing faster, clipping the strings, cutting the notes short. She closed her eyes in wonder at this feeling. She dragged the music from the catgut, threw it out into the very walls.

A great surge of energy seemed to leave her and she wilted instantly. Her bow became mired in dolorous lengths of sound. She squeezed a last lingering sigh from the violin. She was still for a moment. Then, exhausted, she opened her eyes and looked up.

Adrian was crying, hurriedly wiping his eyes. Henry was sitting hunched, fists curled, as though combating something within. Henrietta was completely still, shocked into submission, her eyes wide with fright. And the boy behind them all, standing upright and sure at the back wall, gazed intently at her, and smiled and smiled and smiled.

The lounge was typical of the decor of the hotel. The walls were royal blue, embossed with the gold crossed-palm symbol that was the hotel's cheapening herald. An attempt had been made to pack it with deep, mahogany sideboards, leather armchairs, and tables with thick hoofed legs, giving the room a heavy, masculine air. This was mollified somewhat by an eccentric choice, or perhaps a fiscal compromise, of interior decoration. A collection of conch shells lay gracelessly on the

gleaming, oiled sideboards; the tables were studded with terrible mother-of-pearl coasters, and the bar was set in an unrecognisable mosaic of colourful tiles.

Adrian winced at the gaucheness of it all and sipped at his cocktail, heavily fortified by a number of extra shots of alcohol. Henry had taken it upon himself to invite them all into the lounge for a drink. Now, he fawned over Bev, refilling her glass the moment it was empty, keeping perfect managerial watch over her comfort. He was pressed and polished in his best black jacket, white shirt and two-tone brogues. He had loosened his bowtie a little, and this gesture had, oddly, unravelled his sensible appearance into some dishevelment. He seemed to be deliberately neglecting Adrian. He must admit that he had felt… challenged by Henry, as though one of two alpha males competing for a desired female.

Henrietta watched Bev carefully, myopically, but had the decency to congratulate her on her performance. She was dressed eccentrically in a black tasselled dress, replete with a silly feathered headdress that wobbled alarmingly, and occasionally flopped in her face. Her figure bulged inappropriately through the thin fabric. Yet the extravagance suited her, thought Adrian. He watched her swirl brandy about in her balloon. She was enjoying toying with Henry. Each time he looked to be starting a conversation with Bev she swigged down her drink and held aloft her empty glass to distract him. Henry almost frowned each time.

Tellingly, neither of them had spoken to the boy. They seemed to keep their distance from him as though he were contagious. When he looked at them directly, they shied their eyes away. His name was Jacob, and Adrian worried that, even with his attentive hearing, he had not heard the boy come into the room. He had not known his back was unguarded.

Bev was sat on a couch and was deep in conversation with him. She had not spoken to Adrian since the recital, had gone immediately to the boy at the other end of the room. She seemed to be rapt at whatever he was saying. Adrian hated to admit it, but a twinge of jealousy festered in him. Little upstart. He felt cast aside for someone more interesting, as the cruellest of friends do on occasion. Her recital had achieved exactly what she had intended; she was now included, she was part of the scene. She was but not him. He stuck out like a nail that everyone caught their finger on. That was not his fault, he simply couldn't blend in to such a blatantly humanistic environment. He was always the odd one out. That feeling had bettered him of late, and his confidence had diminished. Even on KS-159, on such an intellectual seat of influence, he felt the title of 'Construction Manager' was a demotion of sorts. True, he could never be as clever or as

worldly as many on the Collection, but he had never desired that for himself. Now though he had a son, and, like every parent, he wanted to imprint success upon Peter, like the success he had never had. He loved him, how he loved him, and how he loved that link, that commonality to Benny. They would always be tied by that, no one could cut him off from her blood. He was part of something with Benny and Peter; he blended in.

He reached out and took Henry by the arm as he passed. Henry let out a small pained noise at the Killoran's grip. 'Who is he?' he asked, roughly nodding at Jacob.

Henry didn't need to turn to know whom he was speaking of. 'A resident of the hotel, like us. That's all.' He tried to shrug his arm from Adrian's grip but he squeezed tighter.

'That's all?' said the builder disbelievingly. 'He appears from nowhere after we've been here for days, and you've never thought to mention him when we asked our questions?'

Henry pulled his arm back and brushed himself down, twisting at his cuffs, irritated. 'I simply forgot about him. He spends a lot of time in his room.'

'Does he?' Adrian growled to himself.

'Yes.'

The Killoran remained silent at this and Henry, judging it to be the end of the dialogue, began to walk away. 'So what made him appear so suddenly for our benefit?' Adrian asked. 'Perhaps we asked the right question.' Henry stopped. The insinuation hung palpably between them.

Henry turned and looked Adrian directly in the eye. This was something not many people did, and for a second, Adrian was startled. 'I don't know,' replied Henry insincerely, 'Perhaps you should go and ask him yourself.' He still did not turn in Jacob's direction. Why should he be afraid of him?

As though it had only occurred to him at Henry's suggestion, Adrian said, 'I might just do that.'

Bev had to admit that she was absorbed by Jacob. Despite her first misgivings of him – she had found something coldly disturbing about his tenseness, his awkward stance – he was proving himself to be an intriguing conversationalist.

'I actually haven't heard a Dagellan violin played with such vigour before. I thought a string was going to snap.' He smiled shyly.

'You and me both,' replied Bev. He had disarmed her, so she asked, 'Do you play?'

He shuffled awkwardly. 'Oh, no. I can't play. I only read.'

'In your room?'

‘Ye.. Yes.’ He worried at his index finger, scratching, scratching.

She smiled at the sudden stutter. Was he putting it on or had she touched a nerve? And why were Henry and Henrietta avoiding him so studiously? He hardly seemed a threat, his clothes made sure of that – a colourful vest over an ill-fitting and crinkled white shirt, grey pin-striped trousers ripped into threads at the bottom, red socks and green plastic-looking sneakers; it was distinct, clashing, and oddly appealing.

‘So you’re an indoor boy then?’ She arched an eyebrow. ‘No wonder we haven’t seen you about.’

He rose instantly to her challenge. ‘I was biding my time. As Henrietta knows, one has to make the right entrance.’ He laughed but his eyes flashed. ‘You played so well, despite the wrong notes, that I had to come and see.’

Bev determined not to be roused by his sniping. ‘I haven’t played for a long time.’

‘No,’ he said knowingly, and she darted him a worrying glance.

‘So what is so special about your room that you stay locked in there all day?’ Jacob smirked. ‘We don’t need locks here. I simply prefer my own company.’

She understood. ‘It must be tiring having to put up with Henry’s mocking obsequiousness and Henrietta’s vanity all the time.’

He nodded, giving her a little victory. ‘I leave them to it most of the time.’ Bev leaned in to him. ‘Don’t you get along?’ she asked innocently.

Jacob’s smile slipped. ‘There has been a difference of opinion,’ he replied ruefully, ‘from time to time.’

‘I’m not surprised. With only the three of you.’ She sipped at her drink to cover up the question in that statement.

Jacob looked at her guardedly. ‘There wasn’t always just the three of us.’ Bev swallowed down the last of her drink and sighed tellingly. ‘No, it never is as simple as it looks, is it?’ She directed it forcefully at him.

He smiled. ‘You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you, Beverley?’ He paused and she knew precisely what he was talking about. ‘But does he?’ he added and gestured at Adrian making his way purposefully across to them.

Suddenly she realised exactly why Henry and Henrietta stayed clear of Jacob. He was playful and venomous and uncannily knowledgeable. Before she could become anything more than shocked, tumbling through layers of the past she had hidden well behind her, Adrian was upon them. Jacob turned to him enquiringly with a terrible revealing smile.

‘Bev?’ asked the Killoran, seeing the worry keenly etched on her face. ‘Adrian, this is…’

‘Jacob. Yes, I know who he is,’ he interrupted in a careless tone. Jacob raised an eyebrow. ‘Bev, could I talk to you, please? Alone,’ he stressed.

‘If this is about Peter and Ms Jones, please go ahead,’ said the boy, lounging ostentatiously in his leather armchair. Still in the midst of alarm, Bev thought. That was the wrong thing to say.

Adrian rounded on him instantly, ‘What do you know about Peter?’ His paws made fists.

Jacob blinked at the violence directed at him but slowly gathered himself together under Adrian’s unflinching gaze. ‘I’ve seen him,’ he said. Adrian took a step forward.

‘Where is he?’ The Killoran’s tone was icily calm but there was no mistaking his intent. ‘What have you done with him?’

Adrian stared out the window at the nightly sea, listening to the healthy roar, breathing in the fresh salty air. One of the moons was full tonight and gleamed its sister image on the restless waters.

They had found Peter. He had been here, at least. Jacob had told them only that he remembered a boy who fitted the description; he had seemed to be quite a handful for the woman who accompanied him, and was always frowning and upset. Adrian had been somewhat mollified, but Bev, being her usual tentative self, was still suspicious. She had pressed Jacob with question after question until finally he had said, ‘Why would I be lying, Beverley?’ Adrian hated the familiarity of her name in his tone.

A thorn of doubt still pierced him and he could not remove it. Why was the boy on the beach then? And what of the wolf? Even if Peter and Ms Jones had been and gone, there was something going on here that included them. They couldn’t just up and leave, they had no information to go on. He would not go back to Benny empty-handed. Nor Brax for that matter. The frustration was gnawing at him.

The waves crashed ashore, beating at the sands. Sometimes, he lost himself in the sound of them, felt drawn away. They reminded him of something else, something unpleasant. He wished he could work out what it was. The sea was a vast encroaching darkness in the night.

There was a small boy on the beach. He was looking straight at Adrian.

He blinked, and all of a sudden, his room *changed*, like a slide in a projector. He was shocked to find the four walls were now white crumbling stone; falling masonry toppled about him and onto the room’s antique furniture. The deafening roar of the sea overwhelmed him. Then he realised what it was. It wasn’t the waves. It was a wall of constant gunfire. He instantly recognised where he was. He was on Világ. He felt a weight in his hands and, looking down, found the

plasma rifle he knew would be there. He turned about in a circle, an O of surprise still on his face.

There was a small boy hiding fearfully among the rubble, by his hotel bed, looking hopeful that Adrian would pass. The Killoran took a step toward him. The boy turned and ran.

Adrian blinked. There was a small boy on the beach. He was looking straight at him. The Killoran took a step to the window. The boy turned and ran.

'Wait!' he yelled, and rushed from his room.

Henry sat on the bed and slowly removed his shoes, then his socks. He pushed his feet into the plush pile of the hotel carpet, luxuriating in the softness. He unlaced his bowtie, gently eased out his cufflinks, and placed them on the bedside table. Then, off came his jacket and his shirt, which he hung immediately in the cupboard. He unzipped himself from his perfectly pressed trousers, and folded them neatly on the bed. He removed his underwear. The gloves were the last to be shed. He picked at each finger until they were off. His hands were covered in a shiny layer of fur. Henry rubbed at it with an expression of distaste. He went to the porcelain bowl and poured in hot water from the jug. The barbers' razor snicked open; the light shone its sharpness. He lathered his hands with shaving foam and began the nightly ritual of shaving. In a few strokes he was done. He considered his reflection in the razor for some time. His eyes were cold and as sharp as the steel. The iris overwhelmed the white.

After he'd tidied up he went to lie on the bed. He closed his eyes to sleep. But it was no use. He could feel the light striving to part his curtains. For some reason he was afraid of the light. It was the same every night.

There was the sound of running feet in the corridor below. Great heavy thumps. It could only be the Killoran. He found himself wanting to bare his teeth at the thought of that large, crude beast. At times he couldn't bear to wait upon Adrian, the intense feeling in him was to fight. He felt contested by the dog man.

He was drawn to the window. Before he'd thought too much about it, he pulled the curtain away from the glass. The moonlight shone in like an arrow to the centre of his heart. He grimaced as pain stood out along every nerve end of his body. Every hair was on end. He could feel each individual follicle.

A huge shape ran from the front door of the hotel, racing up the beach.

Henry felt something. It might have been jealousy. He struggled to keep control in the light. It held him upright. The fear in him was strong, he had to remember what he had done when he was like this;

though he could no longer remember distinct events, he knew he liked to harm. He was cursed by this world, which possessed myriad moons, and always one full each night, and sometimes, barely, during the day. Sweat dripped from his forehead. He felt a bone snap backwards, and cried out. Then the pain came, and it was too much, too much, as his veins burned with bright new blood. *Let go, just let go*, said something within him. *Don't be afraid of it.*

So he let go. And changed.

Bev woke up with a start to find a man in her room. What scared her most was that she knew who it was. He was in shadow at the end of the bed, but she instinctively knew. Oddly enough, she had been expecting him to appear ever since, shockingly, Jacob had referred to him. He stood there, stolidly, waiting for her to speak. She would not acknowledge him. She turned over, and closed her eyes. But the darkness behind them was too suggestive. She could feel his stifling presence in the room.

'I'm not leaving,' he said.

Her eyes snapped open. His voice had been right in her ear. She turned slowly in the bed, and found him there beside her. Her mouth quivered stupidly with emotion. Sadness mingled with fright; her heart beat frantically in her chest.

He moved into the light. A breath punched its way out of her. Such rugged features, that rigid, defined jaw-line, the hint of stubble, deep blue eyes as dense as gemstones. His head bashed in, red leaking down the side of his pale face. She moved to leap from the bed but he grabbed her and pinioned her arms. He sat astride her.

'Don't,' she said through gritted teeth, a warning.

'You're not in a position to tell me what I can or cannot do.' He smirked and scissored his thighs around her. 'Remember when we did this?' He ground his hips into her.

Bev grimaced. 'Get off me,' she said quietly. 'Or I'll…'

He stilled himself. 'Yes?' He gazed down on her suppliant form. She hadn't kicked or squealed. 'Go on then. You've already done it once.' He was bitter.

'It was an accident!' she cried, and shook her head for the hateful tears that came to her eyes.

Was it?' he asked genuinely.

Finding a moment of weakness, Bev brought both her knees up into his back. To no avail. He shifted momentarily, and weathered the attack, then slammed her arms down into the bed. 'I thought we were friends,' he said sadly. Red dripped into her mouth from his leaking wound. She spat in disgust.

'"Were" being the operative word,' she said angrily. And grasping

the solid brass ball that had, of course, appeared in her hand, she struggled against his weight and using all her strength brought it up to connect with his face.

There was an awful wet crunch.

Henrietta sat in front of her mirror and carefully took her face off. The layers of make-up that made her who she was. It took some time. She had perfected not only a mask for herself, but a persona that seemed to coalesce all her favourite parts of herself into one. It was, she thought, theatrically appropriate if not wholly personable. As one who worked within the hallowed world of fiction, she was certainly not one who wanted to come back down to sordid reality. Despite what her agent said. She wasn't to be bullied into doing something as mediocre as television. She was a glamourous diva of old though not too old – and she was not going to lower her image for some two-bit soap opera. She found the idea of her being an icon of the 'golden age' completely repellant, hinging on the fact that her time had been and gone and she was resting on her laurels to get her through. Well, she wouldn't do it! They had sent her these new pretty young actresses to try to convince her to be in the show, always 'oohing' and 'aching' with sycophancy. By the end of those lunches, she had most of them either in tears or outraged histrionics. Oh, she could be a terror.

She wiped the last vestiges of powder from her face. In the mirror was an entirely other woman, flesh slack as a dried peach, age defining her. The eyes were still fresh though, keen and wicked. She did not tolerate fools kindly though she often posed as one. Those terrible stories she created!

'Henrietta,' said her agent, Carsten, behind her. 'Everything is ready. You only have to sign. They all want you. We don't know why you're being so stubborn.'

Henrietta turned to him. 'Because I can be!' She jutted her head forward squarely. 'It's expected of me!'

Carsten frowned at her. 'You're not who you were, Henrietta. If you don't do this then I can't help you any more.'

She glared at him, sitting so authoritatively on the settee. 'Are you saying that you'll leave me?' she asked sweetly, though her mind was churning with worry.

'Yes,' he stated distinctly, an end to it.

She smudged off her lipstick. Her lips loomed red in the mirror. She opened a drawer in the table and took out a slim object. She fingered the long knife in her hands. Scraped at the blood drying on it. It flaked off onto the floor; she watched the red fall. The violence rising in her was becoming difficult to suppress. How dare he!

'I don't think so,' she replied with great surety, and she wheeled

about with the knife.

As the grandfather clock in the dining room ticked the last few minutes to midnight, a wolf padded quickly down the stairs and out into the night.

Bev's blow had ruined his nose and bruised his left eye, but done little else. Her 'friend' shook his head and said, 'There. That was easy, wasn't it?' He paused and a gleam came into his bloodshot jellied eye. 'My turn.'

He moved his strong, thick-fingered hands to her throat, and squeezed.

Henrietta stabbed and stabbed and stabbed at the bleeding cushions on the hotel settee, at Carsten's flapping body, until she was happy with all the red.

Adrian raced along the beach. He could see the boy in the distance, a pale blur. He blinked again, his vision was distorted and upset, shifting constantly from beach to stone, from night to bright blinding day, from Adrian Wall, father of Peter Guy Summerfield and ex-lover of Bernice, to militaristic beast intent on ravage and destruction. 'Stop!' he yelled and it sounded like a barked order in the hollow night. Astoundingly, the boy stopped. Adrian beat the sand to catch up to him. 'Turn around,' he said brutishly. The boy turned slowly, terror etched onto his callow features. 'Is your name Peter?' asked the Moran. The boy said nothing. Almost unconsciously, Adrian raised the plasma rifle in his hands. What am I doing?

The boy exploded in a fountain of red.

* * *

And above them all, in his tower room, Jacob watched these scenes with eyes closed, dipping among them like a concert master in charge of his orchestra. He smiled.

The clock struck midnight.

Chapter Three

It was another morning, like any other. The sun poured light and glittered on the sea. Adrian shivered in the cold immensity of morning; a great sky of polished blue spread like water across the land.

He found Bev on the terrace, sipping coffee. The image made him smile. He sat opposite her, squeezing himself into the too-small seat. A cool, refreshing sea breeze eddied around the table. Yet there was still suspicion and an inexplicable feeling of paranoia in him. As though something had been taken from him.

'Sleep well?' she asked perfunctorily, lowering her cup.

He hesitated. 'I don't think so.'

She raised an eyebrow.

'I've strange aches and pains,' he explained, 'I don't feel I've slept at all.' He shrugged his worry off, 'Ah, must've been the bed.' He reached for the coffee pot.

'Or bad dreams.' She watched him carefully over the rim of her cup.

He frowned and snapped his head up to look at her. Adrian's unease grew. He shied away from her questioning gaze. 'I don't remember,' he said, and it was the truth. There was a nasty feeling in his head, like the tail end of a bad thought. 'I feel like I'm forgetting something.'

'Oh?' she asked. She obviously had the same feeling.

'Yes,' was all he would say until she offered up her thoughts.

She motioned to the coffee pot. 'Have some. It'll wake you up.' She sipped.

He watched her as she turned to the sea. Her square jaw was defiant, her eyes wary, slatted, her lips pursed with a downward moue, long brown hair blowing across her face in the breeze, covering her scars. She was one of his sort – a fighter; he felt a growing affinity with her for that simple reason.

His coffee spilled over, dribbling into the saucer. He cursed and mopped it up with a cloth napkin. Bev glanced askance at him and smirked. Fumbling his cup, he sipped and let the day begin around him.

The sun came out from the clouds and beamed down upon the terrace. Adrian felt the sweat stand out on his forehead.

'I might go to the lighthouse today,' he said; he needed words to fill the quiet.

'Was it interesting?' she asked vaguely, as though obliged to answer. She was coldly aloof this morning and he wondered why.

'It's broken,' he replied simply, like a child. 'I'd like to see if I can fix it.'

‘Oh,’ she said, uninterested.

He peered at her. ‘Is something wrong, Bev?’

‘Wrong?’ she asked, frowning guardedly at him. ‘Of course not. Everything’s fine.’ She sipped to cover up her mouth. Self-consciously tugged at her shirt collar; he’d noticed the livid bruise around her throat. He opened his mouth to challenge her.

Someone cleared their throat behind them. Adrian didn’t have to turn to know it was Henrietta. As an actress she had timing down to an art, always managing to appear exactly at the appropriate moment of interjection. Adrian found something obscene about that ability. Neither of them turned around.

‘It’s a lovely morning, isn’t it?’ She dragged a chair across the terrace, the squeal of metal on stone setting Adrian’s teeth on edge, and sat in between them. She beamed a threat: *I dare you to ignore me now.* Bev frowned and tried her best anyway. Adrian raised his eyes apologetically but said nothing.

‘Have you seen Henry?’ she asked.

‘No,’ said Bev, with iron in her tone. Henrietta glanced curiously at the coffee pot. ‘It was already here,’ Bev explained grudgingly.

Henrietta’s mouth turned into a line. ‘Beverley,’ she said kindly, ‘I’m sorry for my silly little power play last night.’ She laughed. ‘Ha! Me not believing you could play, when quite clearly you’re a very talented woman.’

Bev straightened in her seat. ‘Thank you,’ she said, somewhat mollified.

‘I do so misbehave when people who don’t know me come to the hotel.’ She tipped her head in supplication.

Adrian spoke up. ‘I imagine this place could get tiresome after a while.’ He looked at the empty beach, the flat glaze on the blue sea; everything still, locked.

‘Yes,’ she agreed, rather wistfully. Then she perked up, ‘But I shall be leaving soon.’

‘When?’ asked Bev, too meanly, insinuating she’d already been there too long.

Henrietta paused, judging Bev’s scornful tone. ‘Soon,’ she answered. ‘So they tell me.’

‘So who tell you?’ Adrian asked quickly.

‘Sorry, what dear?’ Henrietta looked blankly at him, and suddenly seemed to have aged a hundred years under the sun, untold lines riven into her face, accentuated by the powder she caked on.

Adrian leaned forward and raised his voice. ‘So who tell you?’

‘I’m not deaf!’ she shouted back at him. ‘And I’m sure I don’t know what you’re on about.’ She sniffed. ‘Now, I heard talk of someone venturing off to see the lighthouse today.’

Taken aback, Adrian gave her a hesitant, 'Yes.'

She gazed at him like a stern matron. 'No, dear, it's absolutely out of bounds. Much too dangerous.'

'But I can fix it,' he remonstrated gruffly.

'And the stairs,' she continued regardless, 'are even worse, shorn to pieces in places, steps breaking off. You could fall and kill yourself.' She smiled knowingly, 'And we can't have that.'

'It was fine yesterday.' He eyed her stubbornly.

'Yesterday was yesterday,' she snapped. 'Anything might have happened. What were you doing anyway?' she demanded.

He was reluctant to tell her with her assumption of his complete obedience. 'Just a walk. I wanted to explore the place.'

'There's nothing to explore. I should know that.'

Bev smacked her cup hard down on the table. Henrietta and Adrian jumped. Bev turned sharply and glared at the silly old flapper. 'Are you warning us away from something that might be going on here?' She paused while Henrietta gold-fished. 'Your thinly veiled threats – "we strangers shouldn't be poking our noses into local business." I mean, come on. It's only *encouraging* us to explore the lighthouse the first second we get.' She sighed. 'Why don't you just tell us what you're hiding? It would be much simpler.'

Adrian stared at Bev questioningly. Something had upset her and she'd grabbed the shell and shut herself up, shrugging on her moody, easily frustrated persona for comfort. He wondered what it was. Though he had to admit he'd been feeling cagey and alert ever since waking this morning; it was as though he was missing a fundamental piece of his makeup, and he couldn't function properly without it. He kept checking the pockets of his overalls.

Henrietta sighed grandly and rolled her eyes, which made Bev tense. 'Beverley, dear, I'm not threatening you in the least. I'm merely alerting you to the dangers while you are here.' She blinked a number of times, head down. 'We have had… accidents before on the stairs.'

'And in the lighthouse?' asked Adrian.

Henrietta frowned, her face wrinkling into caricature with the movement. 'I'm not sure,' she answered. 'I've not been here that long. I only know what Henry told me. Which was that no one knows how it came to be broken.' She paused. 'Or no one can remember. Only that it is not a welcome place.' She looked up at him. 'We stay away. So should you.'

Bev raised her eyebrows doubtfully.

Henrietta smiled gently at her. 'I understand why you must be feeling guarded, dear. It is very frustrating when you've lost something.' Adrian exchanged a pointed look with Bev. 'I'm always losing my little black book, probably because it's always out! So many

names to add to-‘

‘Sorry?’ Bev interrupted her. ‘But we haven’t lost anything.’

Henrietta stopped dithering and sat back in her seat. ‘But your son,’ she said, confused. ‘You both said you’d lost your son. You were looking for him.’

Bev’s frown gave out in a look of bewilderment. She glanced at Adrian who was still and thoughtful. ‘We, ah… we don’t have a son,’ she said.

Henry raced up the beach, feet pounding the sand, leaving deep imprints. He liked to run and did so every morning. His heart thumped in his chest, his blood swirled throughout his body. He felt wild and vital and alive. More than that, he felt structure and routine and difficulty leaving him as he achieved a pure clarity in the stretching of sinew, the constant rhythm of the run.

The sea grasped for him with eager fingers as he ran alongside it. He appreciated its blue, immeasurable vastness, and, similarly, felt infinite when he gazed upon it. It was a good, motivating feeling. He had to adhere to a composed outward appearance. Henry prided himself on keeping control – of himself and therefore by necessity of change, in all its forms. It was important for him that he should not forget his humanity and revert to the incessant beast that lay just beneath his skin. That frightened him. He could not remember what he did then. Only that the urges became so overpowering that it hurt him not to acquiesce. This was why he came across as a stiff, mannerly, authoritative man, he knew. He could never let anyone see him angry. He had to keep the antagonism within. Sometimes he itched inwardly so much that he had to hide away and scratch and scratch and scratch; he felt filled with bristling hair. He had often wondered where it came from – he must have done something very bad in another life to be forced to endure this. And that was what it was, he realised, an interminable, seemingly endless endurance. Which was why he needed to run; another form of endurance, but a pleasurable one, shedding his days.

His feet beat the sand.

He looked up and there was a figure coming up the beach toward him. A hulking shape. The Killoran. He gritted his teeth. He would have to pass him, would have to break concentration and talk. It was only proper. But he felt so instantly degraded and lowly whenever he spoke to Adrian. He smiled; perhaps it was simply his height. He would not endure that this time; he was manager here.

The Killoran was looking at him now, and there was some wariness in his eyes. ‘Henry,’ he acknowledged and seemed surprised when Henry stopped running, forcing the conversation. He’d left great paw

prints in the sand behind him, the manager noticed. Everything about Adrian was large and uncompromising; he's better than anything we could be, he thought. Was he really jealous of the beast?

'Off for a walk?' he asked.

'Hmmm,' Adrian grunted, nodding.

'Not to the lighthouse, I hope,' said Henry, staring him in the eye.

Adrian flashed him a look but said in a presumably innocent tone, 'No, just a walk.'

'Oh, good. It's much too dangerous.'

'Seems like everything around here is.'

'Only if you're not careful,' said Henry unctuously.

Adrian registered the threat clearly. 'I'm always very careful. Don't you worry about that.' He paused to let the challenge sink in. 'Henry.'

They stared at one another. Henry found himself bloom with want for violence as he looked into Adrian's enormous, dark pupils; pits he could fall into, relinquishing control. How did the Killoran maintain his calm? He looked away. Adrian smiled, which riled Henry though he did not show it outwardly.

'Enjoy your walk,' he said.

'I shall,' replied the dog man. Adrian turned and walked up the beach. Henry felt a sudden tingle break out across his skin, and looked up. One of the moons was faint in the sky, uncovered as the clouds blew away – and full. He watched Adrian for a long while before he finally turned away.

Bev took the steep stairs one by one to the tower room. She had a terrible feeling of vulnerability, as though someone was watching her and knew exactly what she would do. Knew that she would place her foot like this on the stair, that she would reach out to steady herself with the balustrade, that she would knock three times on the wooden door streaked with mottled stains. She had a feeling that Jacob knew she was coming. He had, after all, been frighteningly omniscient when they had spoken in the lounge; she was sure of that even if she wasn't about what had made him seem so. She had to speak with him; he was the one person who might be able to help her. He might be able to help her remember what had made her feel like this, so frustrated, irritated, upset. He seemed an intelligent boy.

'Come in,' said his voice beyond the door. Then: 'Beverley.'

She took hold of the handle, pushed the door open.

She was startled by what she saw inside. It was a simple room, yet it held no desk or bed or any accessory she could see. The floorboards were scuffed and splintered but had once been polished, as evident by the few rubbed gleams amid the dust. The walls were unadorned and wallpaper peeled in mouldy strips, the wall itself discoloured behind

it, streaked and bubbled with wet. There was a large window directly in front of her and the sun blazed in, striking every wall with a lance of light. What was most astounding were the hundreds of books piled waist high around the room. In the exact centre sat Jacob, a silhouette. Bev shaded her eyes and walked in, dipping her gaze to look at his face. His eyes were closed, but the moment she caught his face he tucked them open. He smiled. She felt caught in it, and hesitated.

'It's okay,' he said gently, 'Please, come in.'

She shut the door at her back. The sound had a disturbing finality to it.

She stood for a moment, wondering if she should sit, and where. There was only one free space in the room and that was directly opposite Jacob, close. He inclined his head, inviting her down. She wasn't sure, but rather than appear foolish and stand, she accepted, carefully navigating books, and sat gingerly across from him.

'There,' he said calmly. He seemed to be keeping himself completely still so as not to frighten her away, his words soft and low. He waited for her to speak.

Bev glanced down at some of the titles of the books at her feet. *Sexual Repression in the Human Female, Anatomy of a Crime, A Benevolent Psychopathology: Recurring Harm Therapy, Lady Eileen's Book of Etiquette, How to Host the Perfect Dinner Party.*

'Well,' she said, 'When you said you read, I had no idea…'

'No, you didn't.' He smiled again, and she thought it sinister on his face. As though he might have read how to smile rather than found it naturally.

Enough prevarication, she thought, and made herself steadfast. 'I wanted to see you.'

'Yes,' he agreed. *I wish you wouldn't do that*, she thought.

'I need to ask you a question,' she said, leaning in, moving books from under her. He was silent, eyebrow raised in polite enquiry. 'Henrietta… well, she said something about… about a missing son.' She licked her lips. Did he already know this? She frowned. 'I've been feeling… odd this morning. Like I've forgotten something. Something that's just not coming back to me. But what she said made some sort of sense, I think… In any case, it tapped completely into my worry that I thought it must be related…' She looked at him, hanging patiently on her words. 'I wondered… I wondered if I might have forgotten that…' She paused briefly then ran on, 'That you're my son.' She looked at him hopefully. 'Are you?'

Jacob watched her with unquiet eyes for a moment. Then, evidently coming to a decision, he nodded. The soft parting of his lips. 'Let me show you something, Bev.' The familiar use of her name was foreign

on his tongue. ‘Close your eyes,’ he said, somewhat contradictorily, she thought. But she closed them anyway.

She heard his clothing rustle as he moved, and, having a sudden sharp violent image, her eyes flew open. He was leaning toward her but was still seated. He smiled carefully. ‘It’s okay, Bev. I’m not going to hurt you.’

Of course you’re not, she thought, *which is why I brought the knife*. He smiled knowingly, which hardly made her trust him.

‘Do you want to see?’ he asked, a little brusquely.

She did. ‘Yes.’ She nodded. And closed her eyes.

For a moment there was nothing. Then she felt his thin, bony fingers touch her forehead. Instantly she felt invigorated with energy. The black behind her eyelids became red, as though an intensely bright light shone in the room. ‘Open your eyes,’ he said. She opened her eyes.

The room was no longer a room. She looked around and discovered that it was still there, with the books piled high, and the window in front of her, but the four walls were now made of white stone, beautifully carved Corinthian columns, bevelled arches – and all of it had crumbled and broken in some obvious attack.

It was as though Jacob’s room had been transported somewhere else, at the flick of a… flick of a memory, she realised. The boy sat amidst the rubble, quite still, with his eyes closed. His colourful clothes seemed incongruous, much like the situation.

‘You can see it, can’t you?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she replied, worriedly. She stood up and turned about in the space. It looked to her like it had been the foyer of a rather grand building. Now the roof had fallen in, bombed perhaps? The marble floor was ridged with damage and scorching. Were they in the middle of a war zone? And how the hell had Jacob done this?

‘Let me just…’ he said. And then sound crashed in. Bev ducked instinctively and grabbed the knife hidden in her boot. Gunfire. Rapid. And coming this way.

‘We should go,’ she said; a survival instinct had kicked in.

‘There’s no need to panic,’ Jacob needled her, ‘We’re fine here.’

She looked at him. He still hadn’t opened his eyes. Could he see everything? Was he controlling events here? She stepped towards him and was shocked to see a small boy hiding fearfully among the rubble. He stared, terrified, at a point behind Bev. She snapped around and recoiled when she found herself face to face with Adrian. He’d been so close she’d felt the coarseness of his hairs on her nose. She stumbled backwards and fell. She hit rock painfully and cried out. Adrian didn’t react; she might have been invisible. If this was Adrian. He was wearing heavy dull chrome armour, carved with crescents and thick

ridges.

'Adrian?' she said.

She noticed the plasma rifle in his hands. He raised it.

There was a scrabbling from behind her. She turned to see the boy running. The Killoran growled something that sounded like an order and stomped after him. His rifle discharged, shooting a hole from a nearby building, throwing up shards of stone. He shouted again, an exclamation. Surprisingly, the boy stopped. Turned slowly around. He was barely five, his features still plump with cupid youth. He looked at Adrian, eyes wide, mouth trembling with fear.

Adrian shifted the rifle in his hands.

'No!' Bev screamed and ran at his back.

The boy exploded in a fountain of red.

'Enough,' said Jacob. Bev hit the hotel room wall and was knocked back, tumbling over and upsetting books. She was breathing heavily, angry beyond measure. That cruel bastard! That animal!

'Beverley,' snapped Jacob in a tone that brooked no argument and made her look to him. She wiped savagely at her eyes where tears had brimmed. 'I'm sorry. Perhaps I shouldn't have shown you that.'

'He's dead?' she asked, needing the confirmation. *A fountain of red.*

Jacob nodded slowly.

She gritted her teeth. 'Yes. He will be.' She grasped her knife tightly.

Kicking at the books, she pulled herself up, full of purpose. She was almost at the door when Jacob said, 'Wait.'

She turned angrily; he was right, he shouldn't have shown her those images. All she could see was red in her vision.

'How do you feel?' he asked innocently.

How did she feel? Was he so stupid? She felt like ripping and tearing at him, she would stab and stab and stab until she could see her own ability to make red. She felt it overload in her like an electrical current, spilling out. Her knife hand jittered. She felt…

'I'll take that,' said Jacob simply.

Bev blinked once and recovered herself. She looked around at the room full of books, some untidily splayed on the floor. Her eyes found Jacob at the centre. 'I'm sorry,' she said, perplexed. 'Take what?'

'Absolutely nothing,' he replied excitedly, though she wasn't sure why.

She frowned at him and went through the door. A moment later she was back and he was still looking up at her, expectantly, as if knowing she would return. She smiled. 'I, ah, feel like I've forgotten something.' She scanned the floor but saw nothing. Felt her pockets demonstrably, feeling silly.

'I'm sure you'll remember,' said Jacob, and she couldn't tear herself from his unnatural smile. 'Right when you least expect it.'

The lighthouse loomed larger today, the sun striking it; it flashed like the beacon of safety it once was. Adrian noticed the middle window was smashed, jagged pieces of glass in the frame. Was it inclement weather or someone in an act of violence? His desire to get inside became instantly stronger. Did Henry and Henrietta really think their thin warnings would keep him away? There must be some terrible secret inside.

He turned to look over the beach. The suns blazed it into a harsh strip of white. It was empty. He'd felt Henry's distrustful gaze on his back for much of the walk to the stair. But when he'd turned to assuage whether the manager was still there, he had gone. Oddly, he still felt like he was being watched; those dark-windowed eyes of the hotel could hold any manner of voyeurs. The very suggestion that they could bar him from the lighthouse was ludicrous. Exactly what could do they do? He was determined to discover their dirty secrets now that they had admitted their anxiety. He obviously scared them; he suddenly found himself pleased with that, which was not at all like him.

The lighthouse door was nothing but a wooden door, bleached by many years of salt spray in the wind, green strips peeling from it. He rattled the doorknob once; still locked. He battered it down easily with a well-aimed knock from his shoulder. The noise made a hard resounding slap from the cliff top. He expected Henry to come running. But there was only the stark moor, the beach, and the hungry sea. The blue watched him and brooded on events.

Shrugging away the sense that he was getting himself into avoidable danger, he stepped inside.

Smooth stone stairs led all the way to the top, their middles rubbed away by constant footsteps. This lower room just in from the doorway was crammed with junk – planks of wood, paint tins, coopers barrels, a dissected bicycle, lengths of rope, empty bottles, even a few paintings now blotched with rain seepage, colours faded and running. A large green machine with rusted bolts and rubber plugs pronounced itself clearly as the electric generator. Adrian wondered if it was the source of the problem; he wasn't a great electrical engineer but he'd have a tinker to try to fix it. He found once he'd devised the wiring plan there was a certain logical structure to it.

He began to climb.

Halfway up he was out of breath and had to take a rest. There were slivers of glass on the steps. He looked up and found he was at the middle window. He peered out. To his right there was a perfect view out over the town and the hotel. He blinked and screwed his eyes up tight to gain a closer look. He realised he could see the extremities of

the town from up here. It seemed to stretch all along the coastline and stopped only when it hit the promontory in the future distance. The light must have dazzled his eyes, he thought; from here it looked as though it were a painted background to a theatrical scene. It was so completely still as to be unnatural.

He climbed on.

Finally, step after step after step, he reached the top. He gasped and panted, admonishing himself for being so unfit. He should be in top fighting form. But that brought on a stubborn thought; *I shouldn't need to fight anyone.*

The room was flooded with sunlight. It struck the great glass panels in the cage at the centre of the room and produced a warm radiant heat. Adrian shaded his eyes. It was an impressive sight, these mirrors arranged just so, in perfect alignment to give out an intense, safe beam. The feat really was quite amazing, he thought. But why wasn't it working? And why had he and Bev been warned away? He had seen nothing so far that warranted such desperate anxiety. Perhaps though, he could not see it as it was too personal a secret.

He went to the encircling glass and looked out. The view was so vast that it pushed in on him, made him feel swept up like a light piece of paper, wheeling about in a high wind. The town seemed like a child's fantasy in sand; the brooding hotel now ridiculous and incapable of holding thrall. The blue of the sea matched the blue of the sky, meeting to cover them all in the expansive colour. It was so immense that no matter how hard he looked nor how long, he would never be able to encapsulate it in his head. His skull was simply too small for it. He stepped back. Turned inward. Put his mind back to more practical matters.

Searching the bottom of the light cage, he came across the panel he had hoped he would find there. He frowned when he saw it had been jimmied open. Sabotage, he thought. He tugged and it came free easily. Inside, the wiring was a mess, a tangle of leads twisted madly. Adrian's eye's narrowed. Was this what they hadn't wanted him to see? Someone had wanted the light turned off, and had made sure the damage had been permanent. Henry or Henrietta, even Jacob, did not seem to be capable of righting this. Had it been them? Adrian grumbled. Too many questions. Maybe if he got it working again he could flood the dark corners with pervading light, get some answers. Sighing, he set to work.

Within the hour he had managed to extricate the wires from each other and discern some of their purpose. It wasn't all that difficult; the plugs they led to and from were obligingly colour coded. Once he'd plugged them into their correct sockets he stood back. Nothing happened. He checked the wiring again. It seemed to be all right.

Then he remembered the generator. He trudged down the stairs and checked it over, but, surprisingly, it seemed in perfect working order as far as he could fathom. He trudged back up to the light. He wondered if some internal mechanism of the light itself had been damaged? Or was it just being stubborn, having rested so long, reluctant to come out of sleep? Staring at the glass mirrors in the light, he wondered if they were shifted out of alignment. Making a decision, he opened the cage. The light was not as intense now; it was dimming with late afternoon. Strange, he thought, to have such short days with so many suns.

Inside the cage, he gazed at his contorted reflection in the mirrors. A superb feat of workmanship. His foot fell suddenly on a hollow board. He stopped, bent down, and opened the small hatch he found there. It was filled with silver levers. Evidently someone had gone to a lot of trouble to switch off the light. To build the control panel here, in the cage, was a safety measure. For anyone to enter here whilst the light was on was extremely dangerous, the bright force could blind them, the heat burn them. Adrian flicked every lever to an upward position. There was an odd, mechanical clunk and a deep hum of power shuddered through the room. He stepped quickly out of the cage, closing the door tight.

Slowly, electrical power brimmed in the room, as though the lighthouse itself were drawing it from beneath, from the restless energy of the sea.

Adrian took hold of the large black lever on the wall. The master switch. His hairs began to prickle with anticipation. He felt the electrical current pulse from the ancient wiring into the light, saw the glass mirrors flinch with a quick surge of power.

He smiled. ‘Let there be light,’ he said. He jerked the lever up.

There was a moment of stillness, as old systems thought and remembered their purpose, and then, with a harsh clunk, the great light switched on. The beam sliced out into the day. Adrian covered his eyes at the intensity. But it was working! The light juddered into action, gears grinding as it began its circle, flashing safety. He suddenly found himself in the beam. He blinked… and found he wasn’t alone. An older woman with glasses on a chain, a severe bun and hard features was softly superimposed on the room. She was shouting though he could not hear her, and gesturing to a small dog… no, a small boy with furry ears, paws, and bright keen eyes. The boy brought a strange feeling of reminiscence to Adrian. The woman was obviously being held back by something he could not see; she scrabbled at the base of the lamp. The boy looked at her, frowned worriedly, and then raced into the light cage, which was open. The lamp flared into searing whiteness.

Adrian opened his eyes and found himself surrounded by white stone. A terrible fear invaded him. The lamp room was still faintly visible around him, like a faded photograph. The light shone weak intermittent shards into this new landscape.

There was a boy in front of him, hiding among the wreckage. His face was full of such gibbering horror that Adrian's stomachs turned to see it. He took a step forward. The boy ran. It was the same boy as in the lamp room. 'Stop!' he yelled. The tone in his voice was commanding and, surprisingly, the boy stopped. He raised his hands peaceably. The boy's mouth dropped open. 'I know you,' said Adrian. There was a terrible sound. It pushed through Adrian like an unendurable weight. He fell. The back of his head exploded with pain.

He fell. Pulling the lever down. The light snapped off. The lamp room jolted into solidity around him. Power died in the mechanics.

Adrian tried to sit up but found he couldn't. There was something pressing on his chest. He opened his eyes. And came face to face with the wolf, yellow eyes glaring down at him, breath rank as rot, a rictus snarl on its face. It growled from deep within its gut, and he felt it rumble through him. For a second he was curious to see what it might do next. He had no fear of it. Then his head thumped painfully at him and, angered, he took the wolf by the nape of the neck, gaining a fierce bite, and threw it across the room. It was back up in an instant, charging at him before he'd fully recovered his balance. He gave it a hard whack with a paw to the side of its head, and it slid across the stone into a wall. Again, it took only seconds to right itself, panting with effort, before leaping for him. This time he dodged it, and it caught him only a glancing blow with its claws, landing nimbly behind him. He quickly put the lamp between them.

They watched each other through the glass. The wolf black, white cuffs about its legs, a drooling grimace, vicious yellow eyes always centered on him. Adrian, a huge compact frame, muscles bunched, ears turned forward with irritation, brown eyes alert for the slightest lunge. With one hand he felt the wrist of the other, keeping watch, felt the flesh tender from the bite, felt the blood oozing freely from the gash, felt his hand begin to shake. The wolf seemed to smile crazily.

They stalked one another round the light. 'You don't seem to like me, do you?' he said. The wolf grimaced. Yellow eyes glaring, tongue panting. 'That's strange, because I usually get on very well with animals, being classed as one myself.' He padded around the light. 'I wonder if you're what makes this place so dangerous,' he mused. 'Or maybe you don't like the light either.'

The wolf growled, showing rows of sharp, serrated teeth.

Adrian opened up his mouth and snarled in mockery. 'Come on, then,' he said gruffly. He had deliberately backed himself towards the

stairs, breaking out of the stalking circle. The wolf rounded the lamp cage, stopped, wary of traps. Adrian straightened from his hunting crouch, weakening his position. The wolf leapt at him.

He caught it in midair, one hand on its throat, the other its scrabbling back legs. He'd stopped it an inch from his own neck. It snapped and slavered at him. With great effort he swivelled and threw it down the stairs. He heard it land and there was a terrible screech of pain that made him wince at its animal familiarity. Then quiet. He braced himself for another attack. But nothing. Slowly, breathing heavily, he made his way down the stairs. When he got to the very bottom of the lighthouse, there was still no sign of the wolf. He quickly searched the cliff top and found prints running off into the wilderness. A trail of blood accompanied them. The wolf was gone.

Exhausted, he staggered to the topmost step of the rusty stair set in the cliff face, and sat down. Stark points of pain throbbed all over his body. Still, he felt more positive than he had since he had arrived here; he had accomplished something. He knew they were afraid of the light. Now he just had to find out why. The strange inexplicable vision he had experienced in there might be part of it. One thing kept coming back to him. Something about a boy. *You both said you'd lost your son. You were looking for him.* But he never remembered having a son, and that was something that he would surely not forget. Nevertheless, the image of the boy, bathed in streams of light in the centre of the cage, stuck vividly in his head. Though when he thought about it, it always gave him a sense of great unease, as though the boy held danger and discomfort for him. His head throbbed agonisingly. He really needed to look after himself better.

He looked down at the sea below, its flat glaze knowing and complicit, its fingers stroking the sands away, gradually taking apart this place piece by tiny piece. As he watched this smooth, elegant motion an idea began to form in his head. His tiredness washed away, his eyes brightened with the inspiration; something made sense. He smiled.

His hand twitched with pain and brought him back to the sensory world. The wolf's fangs had dug in deep, lacerating the flesh. He would have to disinfect the wound. He hoped Henry had bandages; he seemed a wary enough sort, with an instinct to prepare for all eventualities. Adrian stood, stretching all his aching joints, and prepared for the slow journey back to the hotel.

He had to speak to Bev about this. She'd no doubt find it interesting.

Chapter Four

Bev found the dining room empty. A number of tables had been locked together to create one long one, which stretched the length of the room. Places had been set, with precisely positioned silver cutlery, dinner plates, bread plates, and intricately furled cloth napkins. The tables had been lavishly decorated with an ivy vine that twisted down its length, in and out among the candlesticks, the gleaming silver tureens, and the wineglasses. White clematis were scattered along the table length. Bev was impressed, especially as she had seen no maids, no waitresses, no hired help at all in this place. It was as though the hotel had simply desired it and so it had happened. She frowned at that thought, cautious. There was a delicious smell emanating from the tureens. Her stomach grumbled and she realised how hungry she was. She trailed her hand down the table, collecting the scent of the flowers, a melancholy in her.

She was evidently the first to arrive. She wondered where Adrian was. At the thought of him there was an irrational flash of anger. She wondered where that came from. His presence grated on her at the moment, a constant irritant to her; he was always there, lurking in the background with that terrible glowering visage. She was sure he must have done or said something to offend her. She had been avoiding him, and quite well, considering she hadn't seen hide nor hair of him since the morning.

Jacob had sent out invitations to dinner. Someone had slipped the embossed card under her door, but when she had quickly gone to open it no one was in the long corridor. Another disquieting vagary of the hotel, she mused. What surprises would Jacob have to offer them over dinner? Why now? They had been here nearly a week.

She sighed. Where was everybody? She looked around and her attention was caught by the glass display cabinet against one wall. She peered in. It was filled to overflowing with all sorts of oddments. Faded gold coins, a key for an old-fashioned lock, a glass eye staring up at her; a crystallised egg sack, a board of transistors pitted with a spray of rust, the hollow shell of an alien claw; a snapped crossbow bolt, a salt-encrusted diamante headdress, a crushed and scarred piece of heavy chrome armour; the tangled strands from a film reel, ivory keys from a piano smoothed by the sea, faded barely legible photos; a garrotte slicked with black crusts of blood, a shiny, mirrored oval with a pained face cut into it, a wooden hand with slim, twiggy fingers that curled like a spider; an alien flipper, dried and dead, a bedraggled teddy bear, and… she stopped. A large brass ball that seemed to hold some great significance to her. And beside that, a pair of broken

bifocal glasses, the frame twisted, lenses smashed, on a chain. She had an image of an old woman wearing these glasses, peering sternly down at her through them. She felt familiarity course through her, a sense of ownership. These two objects meant something to her. But what? She placed her hand on the glass.

'They're Henry's,' said a voice behind her. Bev stiffened. *Bloody Henrietta! Always having to come at your back, startling you, as though she'd been watching you all the time, waiting for the right moment to interject.*

'Really,' Bev replied, casually. She was not going to turn around.

Henrietta came over to her. 'Yes. Fascinating what washes ashore these days.'

'These came from the sea?' Bev didn't hold in her amazement.

The old woman nodded. 'The sea is full of bad memories.'

Bev frowned. 'I thought you didn't entertain visitors very often?' She jutted her chin at the cabinet. 'There are some alien cultures in there.'

Henrietta smiled knowingly, showing teeth, 'It's usually the visitors who entertain us.'

'How long have you been here?' queried Bev impolitely.

Henrietta gave her a sharp look. 'Long enough.' She paused. 'But I shall be leaving soon. Yes, very soon, so they tell me.' There was a movement in the glass; someone walked into the room. 'Hello, Henry.'

'I see you've found my cabinet,' he said proudly.

Bev turned to him; she didn't like giving him her back. He was, as ever, pressed neatly into his black suit and perfectly starched, white-collared shirt, cuffs immaculate, bowtie level as his gaze. 'Your hobby?' she asked.

His eyes were cold. 'Not really. I just like to collect interesting things from people, preserve them. So I can remember.'

'Bit forgetful, are we?' she said and was suddenly unsure of herself.

Henry inclined his head; he hadn't taken his eyes off her. He stepped forward and she almost flinched. She noticed he was trying to disguise a limp. His posture too was unnaturally stiff, holding himself in a proper attitude, perhaps hiding some pain. She was instantly suspicious; what had he been up to? Suddenly Adrian's whereabouts concerned her. She may be annoyed with him but she had noticed the antagonism between the two men; surely he wasn't lying injured somewhere? Had Henry attacked him? Adrian couldn't be injured with such tough a bulk.

Then the Killoran stepped into the room, his presence shadowing them all. She breathed a small sigh of relief. Henry stopped his threatening advance to her. Adrian nodded at her in greeting; she nodded back coolly. She noticed his hand was bandaged. Henrietta

measured them both carefully, glanced once at Henry.

'Bev,' Adrian started, 'I have to tell you something.' He had recognised her reserved reception of him and stayed on his side of the table. 'It's important.'

'It can wait…' said a new voice. Jacob stood in the doorway and watched them all like a parent who had walked in on disobedient children. 'Until after dinner,' he said, giving Adrian an appeasing look. The Killoran frowned, looked around at Henry and Henrietta, who seemed poised, and grudgingly agreed, 'All right.'

'Please, sit.' Jacob motioned to the chairs around the table. They all sat, Adrian grunting with surprise. Presumably, thought Bev, at the lack of arms on his seat to allow for his huge frame. They watched one another, eyes darting, scratching ears, the discomfort mounting. No one said a word. Jacob smiled. Then he turned in his seat, 'Henry, would you mind doing the honours.' It was not a question.

Henry pulled himself awkwardly from his chair, a struggle of limbs and furniture. He winced. Adrian frowned even harder, eyes narrowed into points. The manager did not look at Jacob. He removed the cover of one tureen with a flourish, always mindful of his comportment. Slowly but efficiently he ladled soup into each of their bowls, almost spilling some when he came to Adrian's.

'What is it?' asked Henrietta, stirring it truculently.

'Vichyssoise,' said Jacob with a warning in his tone. 'Your favourite.'

'Oh,' she said.

'Yes,' he reprimanded.

Adrian cast a glance at Bev at this exchange. Henry and Henrietta were completely cowed around Jacob; he had them on strings, jerking them along to his own, imagined play. Henry sat down, jaw tight, teeth gritted behind his closed mouth.

'Eat up,' said the young boy. He looked pointedly at Adrian. Bev looked away, began supping her soup. There was silence but for their eating. Adrian thought there was a strange plastic taste to the soup. He reached out and broke off a hunk of bread to soak it up.

'How was the lighthouse today?' asked Jacob apropos of nothing.

Adrian glanced sharply at him. He rubbed involuntarily at his bandaged paw. Henry, he noticed, was glaring at him. His suspicions were founded then.

'Managed to get it working?' asked the boy, seemingly interested.

Adrian considered his answer. 'No,' he replied after a time.

'Oh, how disappointing,' said Jacob, and Adrian could see he hadn't believed the lie. His eyes flashed in defiance at Henry, 'Maybe next time.'

Henry coughed; it sounded very like a growl to the Killoran. He was

confused. Why would Jacob want him to fix the light and the other two be so against it?

Jacob smiled sarcastically. There was silence as they ate.

'Well, this is nice, isn't it? All of us together at last,' said Jacob when they had finished. Henrietta frowned unpleasantly. Jacob was upon her immediately. 'Oh? You don't think so, Henrietta?'

She tensed, and looked up. 'It was delicious,' she replied cautiously. 'That wasn't what I asked.'

'Please,' said Henry but he didn't look up.

'No, Henry.' Jacob put his wineglass down. Red had spilled over the side making a circle on the cloth. 'If Henrietta has something to say, let her say it.'

The old woman looked up. She looked hesitantly at the boy from under her headdress, and then straightened. 'I want to leave,' she said petulantly.

'Not until after dessert,' Jacob replied, matter-of-fact.

'No. I want to leave,' she repeated, stressing the words.

Henry sighed, as though witness to this many times. He stood and began to collect the bowls, readying the main meal.

Adrian waited. There was an expectant hush around the table. Even Bev was noting it, he could tell. Her keen eyes gathered in all the suspense.

Jacob quickly leaned over in his seat to Henrietta, grabbing her chin, pulling it up to his brilliant green eyes. She tried to pull away but he held her firm, uncanny strength in the young boy. His tone was cajoling. 'Henrietta, you know the contracts haven't been signed yet.' She suddenly deflated.

'When?' she asked tiredly.

'Sooner than you think,' he replied, and his eyes twinkled as he gazed at Adrian then Bev. He let her go and clapped his hands together. Henry jumped. 'I was going to save this for dessert but since Henrietta has brought it up…' He stood, breathed in grandly. 'I have an announcement to make.'

Adrian didn't like the sound of that. He tried to catch Bev's attention across the table, through the ivy, but she had her head down, concentrating on the bloody steak Henry had placed in front of her. She worried at the dribble of red on her plate with a knife. It was soaking into the mashed potato. They may do things with an attempt at style here, he thought, but the food left a lot to be desired. Everything run down, cheap, and bare. Bev would not look up. 'Bev,' he hissed at her. She didn't react. He realised she was trying to avoid him. Had he done something to upset her? This was most unlike her, usually she was the one controlling the conversation. He wondered if Jacob had done something to her. If he had, he would regret it. His

mouth turned down in grim determination. The boy was looking at him, knowing, knowing every thought that went through his head. Adrian shivered but did not look away; he would not be intimidated.

Jacob smirked at him unkindly. ‘Henrietta, Henry, you’ll be very pleased to know that both Adrian and Beverley here have been accepted as permanent guests of this hotel.’

There was sudden quiet. Henry sat down. The manager and the old woman were wide-eyed with shock, and not a little displeasure.

Adrian slowly stood, pushing back his chair, hands defiantly on the table. ‘What?’ he growled menacingly.

Jacob raised an eyebrow, but looked to Bev. ‘Beverley?’

She blinked out of her reverie, unaware; ‘I didn’t…’ she started then hurriedly stopped herself.

‘I think you did,’ said Jacob coaxingly.

‘Bev?’ asked Adrian, confused. He was angry at her, he realised. What had she agreed to?

She finally looked up at him. Her mouth was quivering, her eyes hurt, sorry, bewildered. ‘I don’t remember,’ she said and she screwed her eyes up tight.

Adrian was shocked at her impotence. This was not the Beverley he knew. He swivelled to face the callous boy. ‘We’re not staying. You can’t make us.’

‘No?’ said Jacob mockingly. He smiled. ‘Then leave. Is there anything keeping you here?’

A doubt flowed into Adrian’s head and filled him up.

‘If you stay, I can help you find what you’re looking for.’

‘What makes you think we’re looking for anything? And why would you help us anyway?’

Jacob’s gaze was piercing. ‘Because I’m looking for him too.’ Before the Killoran could ask the obvious, he continued, ‘I have my reasons…’

Him? Adrian thought. The sound of the sea scratched at the windows.

‘Now, it would be a shame to have this delicious meal go to waste. And there’s a lovely surprise for dessert.’ There was a hint of menace in his tone. ‘Please,’ said Jacob and Adrian felt satisfaction at how difficult that had been for him to say.

Adrian sat and began to carve into his meat. Henry ate wolfishly, chomping at his steak. Henrietta stabbed at hers viciously. They looked at him, grimacing. He turned to Bev, and found she was staring at him. She was smiling, cheeks turned into crescents as if pulled up by strings; it was incongruous on her usually composed face. She looked so very, very happy. Adrian found himself alarmed. There was nothing to do but finish the meal though. He would decide what to do

about all this afterwards. He knew what was going on here. He couldn't act without Bev. He needed her support to get out of this intact. Afterwards.

He gave a toothy smile to Jacob. *Go on then, you know what I'm going to do? So, try and stop me*, he thought.

He cut into his steak. Blood spilled out.

She tried to avoid him after dinner, throwing Henrietta in his way, but he ignored the actress impolitely and hurried after Bev. She took the stairs two at a time. He caught up with her in the hallway. Myriad doors opened off it to other secrets, other lives. Mottled green wallpaper peeled.

'Bev!' he shouted angrily.

She would not stop her mad dash. He put on a burst of speed to cover the distance, and grabbed her arm roughly with a great paw.

She cried out at the pressure, and swivelled sharply round to face him. 'What?! What do you want, Adrian?' Her eyes were narrowed into angry slits. He recoiled briefly, and she shrugged her arm free from his grasp. He frowned into steadfastness. 'What is going on, Beverley?' he asked gruffly. 'Did I do something to you?'

'Yes!' she snapped, then softened, frowned bewilderingly, 'No…' His hays gaze broke. He reached in for her. She jerked away. He stopped, wounded, and after a moment put his hand down. 'Please don't touch me,' she said. 'I'm feeling particularly vulnerable and… I don't know why.' It had been difficult for her to say and Adrian appreciated that she had said it to him.

'Jacob,' he replied, spitting it out like a bad taste.

Bev looked up at him. 'What about him?' she asked defensively.

Adrian realised he would have to go about this very gently if he was to convince her of the machinations occurring in this hotel. She was evidently not herself. It was as though she had lost the fight in her; something valuable had been neatly excised from her personality. Though not *so* neatly if she was exhibiting such confused and incapable behaviour. It all added to Adrian's suspicions. He sighed, releasing all his pent-up tenseness, and, keeping his distance, looked Bev squarely in the eye. 'There is something going on here,' he said gently, 'You know that. We've spoken about it already, I'm sure. Jacob is the centre of it.'

Bev raised an eyebrow dubiously.

'Please!' he remonstrated, then calmed himself; it would do no good to become angry, she would stubbornly refuse to listen then. 'Just listen to what I have to say… Then you can do whatever you want to do.'

She straightened, a challenge. 'Okay.'

He gathered himself and wondered where to start. Make it quick, he thought. ‘After I was attacked by the wolf–’

‘I noticed you had a bandage,’ she interrupted coolly. ‘And so does Henry.’ So she had her suspicions about him as well. ‘Really? Where?’ he asked, not too eagerly.

She eyed him carefully, then spoke. ‘His shoulder. I could tell. It bunched the suit arm. What have you two been up to?’

Adrian didn’t bother to hide it. ‘I think Henry is the wolf.’

‘I see,’ she frowned.

‘He wasn’t too happy about me getting the lighthouse working again.’

‘You got the –’

‘Yes.’

He rushed on as though he might forget at any moment. ‘And I saw something. An old woman with glasses. And a child.’ He paused, eyes flicked down at his own pelt. ‘He looked like me.’

Bev was breathing shallowly. He looked up and found her wide-eyed. ‘An old woman with glasses?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did they look like? The glasses.’ Her tone was pressing.

‘Oval pieces of glass in a thin gold frame. They were on a chain.’

‘Bifocals,’ she breathed.

‘What is it?’ he asked crudely.

She glared at him, annoyed at his brusque demands, no doubt. ‘There’s a pair of those very glasses in Henry’s cabinet in the dining room downstairs. Smashed and broken.’ A measured look passed between them. She growled, ‘But who is this woman?’

‘And the boy,’ added Adrian. Then: ‘I think I know.’

And there. She looked at him and gave him every piece of her attention, in the hope that he might be able to clear her wavering memory. ‘Go on.’

‘It was after my fight with the wolf… with Henry.’ It felt good to put a name to an enemy. ‘I was resting and I looked down at the sea, and it seemed to be, well, taking apart the cliff, and the beach, and in a few centuries the town. And I thought, erosion, a builder’s adversary, because everything he ever makes is eventually eroded over time.’ She was still listening, intently. ‘Then it struck me. What if that’s what is happening to us, here?’ He let the question hang. The hallway closed in around them.

‘What do you mean?’ He could see she didn’t want to believe but his words made a tentative sense.

‘What if someone or something has been eroding us? Slowly and carefully and precisely, picking the memories it wants, leaving us with blank spots of confusion and forgetfulness? What if we’ve forgotten

why we're here?'

She frowned harder, creasing her face unnaturally. He pushed on; he must convince her. 'Remember what Henrietta said? We were looking for someone. We were looking for our son.' His tone became harder, forcing what had to be the truth upon her. 'It's the boy I keep seeing. And the woman with glasses has something to do with it, too!'

He could see her struggling with the idea, the cogs moving behind her eyes. Eventually she relaxed, brought out by reasoning. 'What if Jacob is the boy?'

'He's not,' he said forthrightly. 'I know he's not.'

Bev leaned in to him, breaking that cautious solitary space around each of them. 'How could we forget our own son, Adrian? It's just not possible.'

'Jacob,' was all he said.

Bev cursed at him. 'Stop it! You've something against him, that's all. You've something against everyone here. It's your innate anger at being considered lowly.' He was losing her. She gave a cold laugh, it echoed hollowly down the hall. 'And that's the thing which makes this whole story a farce. I,' she stressed, 'would have remembered having a child with you because, frankly, it's something that I never would have done in my right mind.'

For a moment, Adrian was shocked, then a burst of anger came tunnelling up from deep within him. He slapped her, hard. The blow knocked her into the wall. She stumbled, crumpling to the floor.

There was a weighty silence. The moment plunged. Adrian seemed to re- inhabit himself, looked blankly at his big hand, could not connect it to the small figure on the floor. Slowly Bev pulled herself to her feet. She rubbed her jaw. Adrian stood by, powerless to act. Finally, with immense effort, he was able to push out a word. 'Bev,' he said.

She did not look at him, hung her head in the most abject of betrayals. 'Go away, Adrian,' she said. She walked shakily down the hallway, holding the wall for support.

Adrian watched her until she was out of sight. He heard a door open and shut. He couldn't move. There were great stones sliding about in his stomachs.

The hotel watched him. It gloated.

It was a still night, with the kind of quiet that presaged a storm. The sea was a dense blue as to be almost black, its surface glazed. Waves rolled ashore, petering out listlessly as they reached the rock pools. Above them, the lighthouse sat dark and silent, waiting. The sky thickened with clouds. No sun or star was visible.

The waves washed ashore.

Then: somewhere, the faint strains of a violin. They grew stronger. It was difficult to discover distance here, and they sounded as though they came from all around, like the warning toll of a bell inhabiting the sky. There was a fallible melancholy in the music. There was memory in it.

The lamp suddenly flashed on, streamed its sharp blade of light into the night. After a few seconds, it began to complete the circular purpose it was given. But as it flashed over the hotel on its round, it jerked to a halt. Its beam was fixed directly on the pink building, illuminating, washing away darkness, lies, and secrets, seeing everything.

In the beam of light, a young Killoran-Human boy named Peter smiled. Centered in the beam of light in his room, a young half-boy named Jacob smiled.

Everything began.

Henrietta sat in front of her mirror and, as she did every night, carefully removed her face. The tissues blushed scarlet.

'Henrietta,' said her agent, Carsten, behind her. 'Everything is ready. You only have to sign. They all want you. We don't know why you're being so stubborn.'

Henrietta turned to him. 'Because I can be! It's expected of me!' She turned back to the mirror, to the entirely separate woman who had appeared there. She would ignore him.

'I'm not leaving,' said the voice.

Henrietta watched her reflection. It seemed younger, more virile, the skin smoothed and supple. She wore a frown that did not crinkle her features.

'You must talk to me,' said the voice, and it was lower, more gravelly than she remembered. 'You owe me that much.'

'I owe you nothing!' she snapped, but she knew that was not true.

'Let me remind you,' said Carsten in an odd, aggrieved tone. 'If you don't do this then I can't help you any more.'

She smudged her lipstick angrily, grinding the red into her lips, making a mess of it, turning herself into a clown. How dare he presume to threaten her! Her fingers wandered over the dresser, past perfumes, creams, beautifying products, and came to rest on a large brass ball.

'You've already done it once…' said the voice sadly, noticing her intent.

'Are you saying that you'll leave me?' she asked and hated herself for the sweet girlish tone. Her mind churned with worry and… red. The violence in her was becoming difficult to resist. It pushed through her veins, darkening her skin and her mood.

‘Yes,’ he said nastily.

It brimmed and spilled over in her. ‘I don’t think so,’ she replied with great surety, and wheeled about with the brass ball.

In that movement, as she swivelled expertly, the room flickered, and the scene changed. But it was too late to delay the damaging action, and the ball smashed into the side of a rather swarthy, young man’s skull. A man who was not Carsten. He cried out with shock and fell at her feet. She cried out with shock and fell to her knees beside him.

‘Oh, God! Markus, I’m… oh, God, oh, God, oh, God… I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was you. I thought it was one of the guards.’ Her heart was hammering in utter horror, of being caught, of what she had done. She stared and stared at the red mess of his head where she had… bashed his skull in. The brass ball dripped with red. She flinched and dropped it. It rolled away across the marble floor of the gallery. Goddamn paintings, she thought, why did I ever want to do this?

Markus sighed on the floor. She stopped her dithering, gently pulled him up, cradled him to her. ‘I’m so sorry. Oh, God, what have I done? Why did you come after me, you stupid…’

The boy on the floor looked up at her through fluttering eyes. ‘Bev…’

The wolf ran and ran and ran in great strides up the beach. It was following the scent of the boy. The boy that smelled so much like him. Like an animal. He was happy too, because he had finally remembered his name: Henry.

The beach blazed with light, each particle of sand glittering in the lighthouse beam. He felt as though he were running on stars. The blood violence of his nature coursed rapidly through him; his pelt shivered with the thrill. His teeth ground together in remembrance of the kill. He had not felt this feeling for a long time, indeed, had probably been trying to suppress it. Now it came to him as vast and uncontrollable as the sea he ran beside.

A wind had arisen, and now whipped the sea’s surface into a lather of foam and spray. Waves began to beat at the shore. The first peal of thunder rolled langorously across the sky. Henry, Henry, Henry gloried in it.

He could smell the boy on the beach, up ahead. By the rock pools. It was a strong, musky stench, familiar. Yet there was also something in it that made him grit his teeth; the boy’s pheromones spoke of superiority, of an unchallenged animal status. Henry was infuriated by this. It made him feel domesticated, suited and pressed into service. He raced on.

There. There was the boy. He had spotted Henry and waited with a

wide-eyed expression on his face. But it was not fear. Henry slowed to make a vicious show to the boy.

He passed through the lighthouse beam.

For a moment, there seemed to be two boys in his excellent vision, one a ghostly image in the midst of the cool light.

When he came through the other side of the beam, he was not on the beach any more. White crumbling stone surrounded him, crashing and falling constantly in rivulets and dribbles, in aftermath. There had been a battle here.

Buildings were battered with signs of heavy damage. He found the sight pleasing. He liked to ravage and pillage. Gunfire was ever-present around him and he felt comfort in the fierce sound. He wondered if he had fallen to be on the ground on four limbs. His Killoran nose suddenly twitched with sense. Looking up, he saw a small boy hiding among the rubble, hoping desperately that he would pass. Had he belittled him, made him fall? The fear in the boy's eyes was like an aphrodisiac to him; he would take it. He grimaced and straightened.

There was an odd light here, shining a beam into this crushed and ruined building. He took a step forward. The boy ran. 'Stop!' he yelled in high

Killoran, a brutish grunt, an order. Astonishingly, the boy stopped. 'Turn around.' The boy turned slowly, terror etched onto his features. Perhaps he thought the Killoran would take him as a prisoner. He smiled. No prisoners.

The thought calmed him. He raised his plasma rifle, it was an extension of him, measuring his ability to carnage. In this moment he was just an animal. He roared and pressed the trigger.

Red.

Adrian had woken with a start to find a boy in his room. He'd been surprised to find sleep at all. The boy stood there, still, waiting for him to speak. Adrian pulled himself into a sitting position, careful not to make sharp, sudden movements that might scare him away. 'Is your name Peter?' he asked. The name came to him unbidden, as though whilst he slept something clean and lucent and pure had washed through him, clearing the fustiness in his head, permitting him to remember.

The boy did not acknowledge him. He stood in a harsh white beam of light that spilled in through a chink in the curtains. The lighthouse! But who'd turned it on? Jacob?

He sat patiently for a moment, measured the dark frame of the boy. He was perfectly still, as though shocked into position. Adrian could not see his face. Enough of this, he thought, and pulled the sheet

away, got out of bed.

The boy moved into the light. Adrian recoiled. He was naked, and a mass of red burns and blisters all over. His skin had burned away to reveal the veins, his eyes jelly in their sockets. He spoke and it was an awful scraping of bone through tissue. 'Remember when you did this?'

In the all-seeing light, Adrian remembered. How he remembered. The walls of his room glitched and flickered with colour shift – white devastated stone to green peeling wallpaper. Világ. 'I remember,' he said, accepting.

The boy made a crude approximation of a smile.

'But,' said the Killoran, and the smile slipped. 'I was a completely different man back then. I was force-evolved, like many of my species. I'm no longer that… thing. I no longer have that past. You're just a memory.' He stared the boy down. 'I'm Adrian Wall now,' he said calmly, and the gentle confirmation in that statement filled him up with purpose.

He went to the window and threw open the curtains. The light coursed into him, bringing it all back, swept through the room like a sluice of water, washing everything away. Images flickered fast on the walls. The boy blurred and faded away. To be replaced with another boy, a ghostly luminescent image in the beam.

Adrian gasped happily. 'Peter,' he said. He went forward to reclaim the memory of his son. The boy ran.

'Wait!' he yelled and rushed after him.

Peter raced down the hallway, his solid little legs quickly taking him far. Adrian followed like a dutiful father.

The hotel had come to life. As he ran, doors flapped open, and he glimpsed into the rooms at the horrors that were divulged. In almost every one, either Henry or Henrietta jumped into existence and committed the most appalling violence on strangers that Adrian did not know. An old man with a thick bushy beard struggled in his bed with the wolf before having his throat ripped out; a fat woman with stubby legs flailed desperately, pitifully as Henrietta garrotted her in a bathroom, the tiles splashed with red; a young girl screamed and screamed silently as she kept pace with Adrian racing down the hallways until Henry leapt on her back to bring her down, his paws scratching at her, and Henrietta stabbed and stabbed her into silence with her efficient little knife. Adrian gawped at this display of vitriolic rage and pandemonium. So this was why there were so few. The actress and the manager had murdered all the other guests. Is this what was to happen to us? Was that why they had seemed so displeased at Jacob's suggestion that they become permanent? Permanent and inviolate to their violence? What was this place?

Images clutched at him as he passed, threatening to spin him into a

new scene of depravity and bloodshed. A violin scythed dangerously in his head. He ignored it all, put his concentration on Peter, as he dashed through the layers of time in the hotel.

His boy – his son! – was leading him somewhere. He knew instinctively that it wasn't really Peter, only a memory of him, kept in the walls of this hotel of horrors. Had his son died here? He remembered the image he'd witnessed in the lighthouse – Peter running into the lamp cage. To turn it off, he realised now. Then he remembered Bev telling him of Ms Jones – *Goddess! Ms Jones! What had she done, bringing Peter here?* – and her broken, twisted glasses in the display cabinet downstairs. If there was room for grief he may have felt it now, but there was an innate optimism in him that Peter, at least, was still alive. He was giving him answers, helping him. Adrian was no longer befuddled.

He realised where they were going. A single thought shone out in him, full of danger and worry – *Beverley*.

Upstairs in his tower room, Jacob was not still. He jittered and thrummed with energy as it poured into him from all the rooms in the hotel. He gritted his teeth, wrestling for control. Light scored him as he sat cross-legged in the centre of every room, seeing and feeling every single moment that had occurred within from every single person who had ever inhabited them.

He'd wanted this, knew exactly what would happen, but now he wondered if he should have been more cautious. Henry and Henrietta were afraid of the light; they didn't want to remember the terrible things they had done. Though, ironically, when the light was on and they did remember, they were capable of the most unremorseful acts of brutality. They only associated the light with ill-formed, uncertain but terrible things when it was off. He would have to be careful of them; they could delight too much in damage and ruin when like this. Even in their names – Henry, Henrietta – there was a twinning of their diabolical excitement at violence.

He had planned for this to occur, in the hope that it would lead him to finding the real boy, and the woman with glasses; he'd still not managed to discern how they'd escaped. He only knew that it involved the precious, omniscient light.

Now as he stalked the rooms of the hotel, he saw that Adrian, that great hulking beast, was resisting, had regained those edited whys that he had snatched from him. He was a danger; Henry had been right, he should be put out of the way, or at least humbled so he might operate on him again.

He was brimming with images, spilling over with violence and blood and ecstasy. But in the midst of this maelstrom of pain and

loveliness, he kept the small boy running, running ahead of his daddy, taking him to his friend. She would deal with him.

* * *

Bev stood at the window, and looked out to sea. It swelled and crashed against the shore, wave upon wave, remorseless, uncaring, brutal. She felt it inside too, had been feeling like this for days now, felt the tide rising within her, felt it slowly come to the level of her eyes. Drowning her in memory. She had endured the blackness behind her eyelids, unseeing, unknowing, for minutes only. She had never been one to find comfort in delusion. She faced the threat head on. Or she ran. She rolled her hands into fists. She wanted to fight, but this wasn't something that was so easily subjugated. This was her, turned inside out, ripped, raw and bloody, for all to see. For her to see. The beam from the lighthouse smothered everything.

She was not going to turn around.

'Please,' said the voice.

'No,' she snapped, and winced, realising the acknowledgement.

'I'm not leaving,' the voice said calmly.

She wouldn't speak, wouldn't give words to this person. It only made them more tangible, more sympathetic.

She fingered the long knife in her hands. Scraped at the blood drying on it. It flaked off onto the floor; she watched the red fall. The violence rising in her was becoming difficult to suppress. The colour brimmed beneath her eyelids, violent as the sun. It was not her violence but she loved it.

There was a small boy playing with a dog on the beach. At least she thought it was a dog, though something about the spindly shape was wrong. Bev watched the boy and was frightened at the immensity of the sky that dwarfed him and the vast, endless sea that crashed and grasped. The black dog ran along the wide strip of beach. The boy laughed at its antics. The boy laughed. The boy? There was something about a boy she should remember. A tear slipped down her cheek. Everything was wrong, muddled.

'You must talk to me. You owe me that much,' said the man behind her. owe you nothing,' Bev replied bitterly, but she knew that was not true. 'Apart from your freedom.' He paused, bitterly. 'If you don't do this then I can't help you any more.' She could hear the threat in Carsten's tone.

Bev bit into her tongue, drawing blood. 'Are you saying that you'll leave me?' Her whole world trembled at the possibility.

The boy on the beach laughed again. Or was it a scream? The sound echoed through her.

'I don't know why you're being so stubborn,' said the man and touched her on the shoulder.

‘Because I can be!’ She jutted her chin out defiantly. How dare he threaten her!

The waves crashed on the shore.

The boy laughed.

The red spilled over in Bev and she wheeled about, the knife poised. And recoiled when she found herself face to face with Adrian. He’d been so close she’d felt the coarseness of his hairs on her nose. The light passed over het Memory came rushing in. *A fountain of red*; the colour pounded at her brain. She remembered white crumbling stone and, finally, she remembered a boy. *The boy exploded in a fountain of red.*

‘Bev,’ said the animal.

She quickly and easily slid the blade into his gut.

‘There. That was easy, wasn’t it?’ said Jacob in his tower room.

The waves crashed on the shore.

Chapter Five

Bev woke to the sound of strong rain, battering against the window panes. It was unnerving after so many long days of sun. Her room, by contrast, was full of a stillness that seethed with aftermath. She knew it was wrong.

She threw off the sheet and walked into the small en suite, the tiles cool on her naked feet. As she reached for the tap, she started. Her hand was covered in blood, dried around her fingers. She looked at it in horror for a moment and then quickly slammed the water on to wash it away. It turned a sickly pink. When she was sure it was scrubbed clean, she took two handfuls of water and splashed them over her face. The cold shocked her fully awake. She glanced at herself in the mirror. Droplets slipped down her face like tears. There was an ineluctable melancholy within her that she could not shake free.

She went to the window and gazed out. The rain was thick, spattering the sea, which writhed and heaved with forms. The sky was a solid grey above. A beam of cold white light cut into the day. Bev peered through the wall of rain. The beacon in the lighthouse was working, circling in its cage, pushing light out to sea. Every so often it flashed across the hotel, and she was bathed in utter white. Someone must have got it working again, she thought. She felt oddly wary of the light; it made her feel vulnerable.

A shiver rippled down her spine. She stepped back from the window. She felt safer out of its view, closed tight in this room. The hotel was quiet this morning; she felt it throughout the structure, a disturbing pall cast over everything, as though it might be in shock. She shrugged, but the feeling would not fall away so easily.

She'd go down and have some breakfast. That was what she'd do.

The rain splashed fiercely on the terrace. Henry had forgotten to put up the plastic sheeting. Bev looked around and found a steaming coffee pot sitting on an indoor table. She smiled; it was exactly what she wanted. The curious properties of the hotel no longer unnerved her. She sat and poured a cup. She sipped; it was good hot strong coffee.

It was utterly silent in the dining room, an expectant hush. It must be early, she mused. Time seemed not to exist here; there was day and night only; she wondered about the whereabouts of the hours in between.

The sound of the rain on the terrace leaked into her thoughts, heavying them. The hotel was gloomy with shadow this morning; the

rain seeped into its walls, peeling the wallpaper, damp settled in. Bev certainly felt as though she shouldn't be alone here. Whenever she turned, a dangerous emptiness blinked on the edge of her peripheral vision.

She sipped again, to calm herself.

As though in answer to her want of company, someone cleared their throat behind her. She had been here long enough to know that it was Henrietta. Always the same entrance; for an actress she was deadeningly predictable, possibly one of the many reasons her star had not risen in the film world.

'Morning, Beverley,' she said.

'Morning, Henrietta.'

'It's a bit grim, isn't it?' She came to sit opposite. She smiled. 'But then it's only mirroring what happened last night, I suppose.'

Bev frowned. 'Last night?'

Henrietta stared at her for a moment, then shook her head. 'That damn boy, thieving people's memories. It's not right, you know. Fortunately Henry and myself have developed somewhat of an immunity to his little edits. Haven't we, Henry?'

The manager limped into the room, uncaring that she should see his rough gait. 'Indeed. They last for longer on each occasion the light is turned on.' He also sat next to Bev, hemming her in, and ostentatiously poured himself a cup of coffee, slurping it noisily.

'I don't –' Bev started.

'Remember?' Henrietta interrupted. 'Of course you don't.' She looked happily at Henry. He smirked wickedly back at her, a wolf's grin. 'Let's help her, shall we?' she suggested.

They both reached for her hands. She pulled back sharply. She knew they were going to do something to hurt her. Henrietta gave an admonishing moue. 'Do you want to see?' she asked, and the question pushed Bev into déjà vu. She'd been asked that before. She knew the correct answer.

'Yes.'

'Good,' said Henrietta. They took her hands in firm ones of their own. 'Don't worry, we're plugged in at the moment, you'll see everything,' said the actress, and there was distinct malice in her tone.

'Plugged in?' asked Bev, frowning.

'To the hotel, dear.'

And then, before she could remonstrate or even consider the implications of that, they closed their eyes, and the whole dining room flickered madly as though it were only a two-dimensional painting and other layers heaved and swelled underneath. Light and colour changed, objects faded in and out of sight.

Bev found herself for single moments in other places entirely,

superimposed on the very same structure as the dining room. A white stone building, ruined and crumbling, a boy staring, an animal she knew standing there in dull chrome armour with a gun; running, running, through a minimalist setting, paintings on every wall of a gallery, turning a corner, surprised by a face, and a brass ball, picked from a nearby plinth for comfort smashing down into the skull, a burst of blood spraying out, and then horrible recognition dawning; a small overly bright caravan, clothes ranged down the length on racks, sitting front of a mirror as a man talked cruelly to her, the feeling of rage and distrust and betrayal consuming, the knife wheeling about, stabbing and stabbing and stabbing down into the flapping body, the shrieks lessening; the terror of change in a man, the excruciating pain of it as it happened despite the resistance, and then the wild letting go, the freedom and the thrill of biting teeth, the jaw coming down into flesh, ripping amidst screams and the plentiful, ecstatic taste of red.

Bev gasped for breath as she recognised everything, as memory stolen away came flooding back to overwhelm her. It went on.

An older woman with glasses on a chain filling her pockets with rocks, a sadness dwelling deep inside her, walking into the sea to drown, a young boy running down from the hotel, shouting, growling, growing taller, stronger, older with each step; and then it came to the last layer and she found herself in her own room, and the violence brimmed in her, overflowed, pushed down through her veins, exploded out of her, 'Please,' said a voice, and she snapped, turned, wheeling about with the brass ball, wheeling about with the knife, and sliding the long steel into whomever/whatever was standing there. She looked up and it was Adrian.

They let go of her hands.

The room popped back into focus.

Bev felt a solid weight drop in her stomach, and she leant quickly over and was violently sick on the floor. Adrian! How could she forget Adrian? Oh, shit, what had she done to him? No, what had they made her do to him? The images still flickered like moths in her head. She knew what Henry and Henrietta had done. It was despicable. How dare they place their own hatred upon her, manipulate her into acting for them, committing their own harm on someone who obviously cared for her. She sat up and turned on them, her face a grimace of hate. She'd hurt Adrian.

'I know what you've done,' said Bev, 'That was a big mistake, letting me know.'

Henry grinned, a vicious leer. 'It was nothing to do with us. It was your own memories that allowed you to do it. And you do have some very dark ones.'

'Poor Markus,' said Henrietta mockingly. 'Taking on your

punishment, while you ran away.'

Bev narrowed her eyes but then smiled. 'Poor Carsten,' she replied, iron in her tone. Henrietta eyed her wildly. 'We can both play this game,' said Bev.

'Mine wasn't an accident,' smirked the actress. 'Or did you want to kill the boy. Just like you wanted to kill Adrian.'

'I didn't kill Adrian,' she said coldly, and the words did not fit together. She swallowed down a lump of anguish. She would deal with that later. 'You did.'

Henry tsked. 'It's not us behind this.' He paused to gauge her reaction. 'It's Jacob,' he said with a growl.

'Jacob? He's just a boy.'

'No he's not,' Henrietta seethed. 'He's not even real.'

'What do you mean?' asked Bev, expecting lies and traps.

'Jacob is the hotel,' said Henry, simply.

'And our caretaker,' though Henrietta sniffed spitefully at that. She turned a grave look upon Bev. 'You see, my dear, this entire, charming pleasure resort, is an asylum.'

'For the disturbed,' added Henry, as though to counterpoint, almost laughing.

Something clicked in Bev's head and made sense. Jacob – the hotel – sitting in his tower room, stealing away the bad memories of the disturbed. She remembered the books she had seen. Was it some kind of therapy? Or was he keeping them, soaking them up like a sponge, vicariously living these horrors? Why? To make sense of them? To find a psychological cure? A terrible thought came to her, To revel in them? And she and Adrian had become caught up in the treatment, like flies in the web, spilling their own darkest imaginings out into the walls of the hotel. It lived and breathed through them. But surely it had all got out of hand? Henry and Henrietta had unlocked their doors and beaten their own paradise into existence. What terrible things had happened to Clarissa and Peter here? She shuddered, expecting the hotel to read her, and project more ghastly images. Clarissa, seeking asylum and peace…

'What is most disturbing,' Henrietta began, 'is how much he seems to think of you, dear Beverley.'

She glared at them. 'What? You're not his favourites any more?' They had seemed to act like meek, disciplined children when around him.

'We never were,' replied Henry coolly. He poured himself another coffee. The pot dripped the last black bead into his cup with a plink of finality.

'That's quite beside the point,' snapped Henrietta. She smiled and her powdered face cracked into canyons. Her eyes gleamed nastily

under her red bob. ‘I think that Beverley should be punished for what she has done. It’s only right.’

‘And what of your own punishment!’ she yelled, desperation creeping in.

‘This is it!’ said Henry. ‘We endure our crimes nightly, and forever. We remember them so as to overcome them. And then, daily, we forget them when he takes them away, only to have them reawaken come the night again.’

‘But you remember them now and it’s day,’ said Bev, playing for time. If she could just casually reach down to the knife in her boot… She’d noticed the table lacked silverware.

‘Properties of the lighthouse,’ said the actress glibly, as though she didn’t quite understand.

‘We’re not complaining,’ explained Henry. He glanced at Henrietta and made to consider. ‘Yes, I do think you’re right. She should be punished.’ Henrietta clapped her hands with schoolgirl glee. ‘How shall we do it?’

Henry glanced out into the wet. ‘A drowning, I think.’ He sipped.

‘No,’ said Bev. Her fingers touched the shaft.

‘How appropriate,’ replied the actress wryly. ‘Just like dear Clarissa.’

Clarissa? Bev took the moment, quickly slipped the knife from her boot, wheeled about. And in that movement the action came far too familiarly to her, and she paused for the slightest moment. Henry put out a long leg and tripped her. She went sprawling, knocking her head on the hard edge of the table, feeling a cut open on her forehead.

She was stunned for a second, disconcerted. Then Henry placed a knee in her back, and pulled her arms back with some force; she cried out. ‘Come along, Henrietta, stop sipping coffee, and help me with her.’ A chair dragged backwards, and footsteps clomped heavily on the carpet.

‘She’s a hardy bitch, isn’t she?’ she opined. She leant down to Bev’s ear. ‘Soon, my dear, you’ll just be another piece of detritus the sea washes ashore, to rot on the sand and be picked at by birds.’ She hmmed, ‘Though I hear drowning is a peaceful way to go.’

‘Not for her,’ said Henry, pulling her up, arm twisted. ‘She’ll fight.’ Bev would not speak to them.

Outside, the rain pounded harder on the terrace.

It was his height that saved him. If it had actually been Beverley who had struck him – an eye for an eye, he supposed – she would have known his weaknesses. But it hadn’t been her, unseeing and vague, and the thrust she dealt had been angled downward in a stabbing motion, as though for a smaller man, or one sitting down. The blade

had passed through his side, just missing one of his stomachs. He hadn't felt anything at first but had stumbled anyway, the shock of Bev being his assailant. Then a flame surged up his body and he had fallen. He hadn't realised how weakened his condition had been from summoning up all his resistance. He gritted his teeth and growled to master the pain.

Bev had casually placed the knife back in the dresser drawer and climbed into bed.

The pain arced up to his chest, and he'd wondered if there might have been poison on the blade, or if Jacob were somehow aggravating the wound to seem greater than it was. Images assaulted him harder than ever.

'Adrian?' Bev had whispered in her sleep. He passed out.

He came to slowly. Light scraped at his eyelids, pushing in. He was lying on something hard and unyielding, corners pointing into his back. He moved and a throb began in the wound. He groaned, and opened his eyes. His mouth fell open. Oh, no, he thought.

Crumbling white stone buildings surrounded him, pitted and scarred by heavy gunfire. He was lying amid the rubble as though tossed by a careless explosion. He got to his feet, wincing at the sharp pain in his side; he had a brief stab of anger at it, then quickly curbed that feeling. The hotel had played this scene many times; he had its measure now. He would not be confronted by what he did. He had made his apologies, and was making up for this past now – he had his own son whom he would never hurt, who could live for this other's life, who would never own this violence. 'I've done this already, Jacob,' he yelled to the sky.

There was a scrabbling to his right. He turned and saw the boy, staring up at him, afraid. Adrian smiled down on him, 'Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you.'

Gunfire crashed in. The sound squeezed at him, did something to encourage the baser, primal instincts in him. No! It was a good sound, a strong sound, a sound to march to, to be governed by. He looked down and was horrified to see the dull, chrome armour of the Killoran military, carved with brutal sigils and gruesome animal heads. NO! He tried to resist but his arms came up like they were on a puppeteer's strings..

'NO!' he yelled. 'I will not do this again!'

The boy ran.

His rifle tracked the small figure easily. Adrian roared his defiance.

The boy exploded in a fountain of red.

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Jacob sat in his room with his eyes closed, but he did not see. He was resting after the exhausting events of the previous night. He should not have tempted that much memory from the building. The light had been dangerous. He had not been able to hold it all inside himself and it had spilled over into the framework, layering the rooms, inhabiting the guests. Muddle and catastrophe, he thought now, completely undisciplined and untidy. Worst of all, it had seemed to give Henry and Henrietta a greater measure of control over their fears. Whenever he needed to turn on the light for a little sanity, it made them much stronger and he had to begin the process with them all over again, taking them apart piece by agonising piece. That was the problem though, he kept taking and taking from those two and they kept adding new experiences to themselves when they managed to murder another. The repetition was supposed to induce a cathartic state but they were beginning to master this with a tighter psychological hold on their malaise. They were beginning to master him. It just would not do.

He wondered what to do with them. He couldn't kill them himself, that would defeat his entire purpose. Maybe he would have to strip them back to only their very crude, rudimentary thoughts of movement. A harsh therapy but he'd just about had enough of their disobedience. Especially when they threatened Beverley. He needed her to take him to the child. She was his escape from this beautiful terrible building that was an ever-present part of him.

He plugged in to search her out, eyes flickering behind his lids, rooms dashing past, images from way past and present touching him briefly, moving on. Quickly he found one that alarmed him. Bev on the dining room floor, Henry crouched on her with his knee in her back. He replayed the scene, his jaw tightening in anger. They had been very clever. They knew he could not leave the hotel, not directly, not on his own two legs. He fumed impotently for a moment, then calmed himself. He would have to help Beverley another way.

The Killoran was still tied to the bed in his room, although he wasn't actually experiencing that discomfort. He was looped into an abiding emotional memory, something that connected him with the reason he came here. A young boy. He didn't seem to be making any progress. Jacob supposed he had been awfully cruel to provoke this memory; taking his frustration out on Adrian was not a proper method of treatment. He sighed at his own recklessness, and reached in to help the great beast.

He was surrounded by crumbling white stone buildings, pitted and scarred by heavy gunfire. He was lying amid the rubble as though tossed by a careless explosion. He got to his feet, wincing at the sharp pain in his side; he had a brief stab of anger at it, then quickly curbed that feeling. The hotel had played this scene many times; he had its measure now. He would not be confronted by what he did. He had made his apologies, and was making up for this past now – he had his own son whom he would never hurt, who could live for this other's life, who would never own this violence. 'I've done this already, Jacob,' he yelled to the sky.

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He dropped the rifle. The boy faded into the smoke.

Adrian gasped heavily, tears wet his furry cheeks. That wasn't how it happened, he knew that, but it had stopped and he was the most grateful he had ever felt in his life. The gunfire petered out to a dull roar. A roar that blurred into the sound of heavy rain. His armour diminished and was then gone completely. He ran his paws through his furry chest hair, gladly free of the weight. And in a blink, he'd fallen horizontal, and was back in his hotel room, arms and legs tied to the bedposts. He was so relieved to be back that for a moment he didn't care, and just lay back in the softness, breathing deeply, recovering himself.

In one swift jerk he snapped the headboard posts off and casually disentangled his wrists from the rope, leaving them free to untie his ankles. His wound didn't hurt so much now, though he would need to bandage it. There was no time. He had to find Bev, no matter that she had tried to kill him, there was a desperate will in him to find her, help her. He knew she was in trouble.

He went to the window and looked out. The rain drove down in torrents, lashing the hotel, the shore, the sea. On top of the cliff, the lighthouse beam circled, spraying its cool white clarity across the grey day. As it touched the beach it briefly illuminated three figures, two

holding the middle one, who was struggling and kicking.

He raced from the room.

They manhandled her up the beach. She didn't make it easy for them, dragging her feet, dropping her weight. The rain plastered her hair across her eyes so she could barely see three feet in front of her through the wall of water. The sea roared and raged, ever eager for more things to fill it.

She was trained in self-defence. She should be able to best these two easily. An old woman one of them! But despite his injuries Henry's grip was firm; she knew he had the tensile strength of the animal in him. They were both gripped by violent fervour. There was also a small part of her that believed she should be punished. She had got away with murder – it was an accident! – and never truly been punished beyond the guilt that edged her memories of that past. She'd been stupidly younger then, longing to see disappointment on her mother's face. How she had wanted to harm her ingrained privilege, how she wanted to be anything else; how typical, she thought now, that what we always want is something we do not have.

Well, she had it now, she'd been brought down low, after she ran, to the world of the thief, a scraping existence, but one she had managed to better her eye for art was never false. It was pure fortunate coincidence that she had come to work for Braxiatel, and she'd slipped effortlessly, like crossing a threshold, back into the world of fortune and privilege again. This time on her own terms.

They arrived at the rock pools, clambered ungainly up to them, Bev twisting herself, falling, cutting her shins on the sharp rock. Henrietta, irritated, slapped her. 'Bitch,' she hissed. The rain bulleted down on top of them.

'No ceremony,' said the actress. 'Put her in.'

'Wait!' said Bev. To have it all over like this, so immediately, was ignominious. She realised this was it, she had to escape here, whatever plan she had been formulating had better make itself clear right now! But her mind was blank, saturated with wet. She kicked out and landed a neat blow on Henrietta's thigh. The old woman grimaced but stayed upright. She struggled against Henry's hold. He twisted her arm tighter. Her shoulder snapped. She cried out as bright points of pain coursed down her side. While she was stricken, he swept out a leg and tripped her. She went face down into a pool of water. A weight came down on her back.

The immediate sensation was of refreshment, the water cool after the warm rain. Then panic took over and she flailed when she realised she couldn't get back up. She struggled. The water was silvery, struck with light – though she could only guess at the murky forms. Her face

brushed against anemones that shyly sucked themselves away at such a terrible disturbance. A crab watched her curiously, waving its pincers gently. A stupid, undignified way to go, she thought.

She hadn't been able to prepare herself for the immersion, her breath was already running out. *I don't need to breathe.* But it was wishful thinking. Her head was about to burst. She gulped in a breath, and flooded herself. The water tasted briny; she could taste each distinct living creature in it. She began to drown.

Adrian flew from the hotel and dashed frantically up the beach.

Henry liked the way the veins stood out on his hand as he forced the woman into the water. He revelled in his complete feeling of domination. He was alpha male. He commanded. He liked the way her hair splayed out like choking weeds around her head. He liked her shudderings underneath his strong palm.

A smell came to him and doubt crept into his head. He sniffed again and turned. The Killoran, that great hulking beast, was racing up the beach for them. Already he could feel his overbearing presence. Not this time, he thought.

'Henrietta,' he barked, 'Take her.'

The woman would try to fight her way free of the pool anyway, so he lifted her out. She coughed up spumes of water, gasped in air in its place. It would do no good; she would be going back under. This was simply a cruel respite.

'Hold her here,' he said, and started to show the old woman the pressure points on the neck to subdue her.

'I'm quite capable,' she said. And without waiting for Henry's advice, she grabbed Bev by the neck, just as he would have shown her, and pushed her under again. Her kicks were weak and not well aimed.

Satisfied, Henry turned to confront Adrian, and let go. But there was no moonlight here, the sky thick with cloud cover. Henry cursed. He would not have teeth to snap nor claws to rake flesh with in this fight. But he would still fight. He rolled up his soiled cuffs, kicked off his shoes, and leapt at Adrian.

Adrian pounded up the beach, leaving enormous tracks in the sand. His heart hammered stupidly in his chest. His breaths were short, his strides long. He had to get there in time. He had to save Bev. Please, don't let me be too late. He could see them at the rock pools. He saw Henry stand and turn and Bev come out of the water, gasping, fighting. She was still alive! That spurred him on. Henrietta spitefully pushed Bev under again. Henry rolled up his cuffs, kicked off his shoes and leapt straight at Adrian.

Adrian let the anger take him to a place he had been long ago in the past. He filled himself with red. He would satisfy every patient who had been killed by Henry and Henrietta.

Henry leapt at him. Adrian broke his neck with a snap.

Bev's vision was beginning to blur. Shafts of light flickered in the water, confusing her. Was she still breathing? Something glinted in the bottom of the rock pool. Her eyes picked out oval lenses, gold frames on a chain. Her glasses had fallen off. She reached down to pick them up but they seemed a long way away. And she couldn't see very well without them. The shafts of light were becoming brighter, stronger, arcing into her eyes. There was an odd brackish taste in her mouth and a pain in her shoulder.

Damn it, if she'd lost her glasses, there'd be hell to pay. If only she could reach them. She pulled herself deeper into the shiny water. But there was resistance. Suddenly there was a weight off her back. She reached down… only to find herself being pulled back. There was a brief blinding shock of pain in her shoulder.

Bev broke the surface of the water and came to in the shock of air. The rain was warm and lively on her face. She coughed, spuming water from her insides. She learned to breathe anew. It was a painful experience but she loved every second of it. Her lungs felt raw as bloody meat.

A great beast knelt over her, cradling her. 'Adrian,' she said weakly, 'I must be dead.'

In spite of the circumstances he smiled. Not yet,' he replied gruffly. He glanced worriedly down at her shoulder. Her arm flopped limp and useless by her side. She could not feel anything, there was a numbness. 'I had to reset it,' he said.

'Where's Henrietta?' she asked, remembering.

Adrian looked over his shoulder. Bev was aware of a high keening moan over the wind. He looked back to her, frowning. 'I had to break something of hers,' he said, unhappily.

She didn't question him. She just let him hold her.

She gave a small sarcastic laugh. 'So what now?' she asked.

Now we end this,' he replied, determined. He peered up at the looming façade of the lighthouse.

The lamp room was made of light. It blazed with incandescence, as though the beacon was turned in upon itself. The mechanics ground noisily with determination. It was uncomfortably hot in here.

Adrian sat Bev down by the cage. 'Can you turn it off?' she asked.

He shrugged. 'I turned it on.' He went to the master switch and pulled it downwards. The light shined on. He looked to Bev. She was playing with her fringe, worried; it was her most endearing feature,

and he knew she would be all right then.

He gleaned the danger of the cage, eyes slatted against the glare. His son had braved it, so could he. He stepped forward.

The beam was suddenly sucked back into the light, then, after a pause, it was thrown out into the room and a figure stood in the short, concentrated glare. It was Jacob. He glowed with pulsing, ethereal light, a slender image in the oldest film, flickering, flickering hesitantly.

'Wait,' he said.

No.' Adrian ignored him, wary of more traps. He took another step. 'Wait!' said Jacob, this time a shout. 'Don't you want to find Peter?' Adrian stopped. He turned and glared at the boy. 'Do you know where he is?'

Jacob hung his head. 'Yes,' he admitted after a time. 'But I want to help you to find him.'

'Why?' said Bev suspiciously, from the ground. Her frown was back.

Jacob closed his eyes. Adrian shouted at him, afraid he was trying his manipulations on them. Jacob snapped back to alertness. He sighed. 'Before Peter came, I was just the hotel. There was something about him which attracted me, which was innocent and unfilled by anger or violence – though there was a small part of him that held those feelings. He was so open, like a nearly empty box. Something yearned for that, for space, for a place to hide away from the carnage I had to deal with every day, the hate that I had to take from all these patients.' He fluctuated in the light, as though disturbed. 'It wasn't until Peter arrived that I existed; the hotel couldn't cope with an innocent like him. It fell over itself, made me from his memories. I am, in essence, your son.'

Adrian glowered. 'You are not my son.'

'That was the problem,' said the ersatz-boy. 'I still had all these other hideous memories in me that I had to shape and control and hide away from their owners, so that they became healthier and kinder and nicer people.' His tone became bitter. 'But what did I feel? I could only take their most disturbing experiences because that was all they gave me! They forgot, but I didn't. I remembered everything. All the hate, the rage; the stabbing and the biting; the strangling and the maiming. But Peter gave me something…' He stopped and considered. 'Something kind.'

That was it, then. This child who was not a child was wanting. He didn't even know what it was he wanted, but he wanted it desperately. Someone to notice him, maybe, some sense of place and purpose. Someone to learn from. The same demands of any child. But a pang went through Adrian; this needy creature was an insight into Peter's own wants.

Bev spoke up. ‘They escaped, didn’t they?’

‘Yes,’ the boy said, sadly. ‘I don’t know how. I thought I had Ms Jones quite under my spell. She had a lot of grief in her, that woman. Henrietta didn’t have to try to drown her, she was ready to die.’

‘And did she?’ asked Adrian, concerned that he may not see her eyes when he had Peter returned to him.

Jacob smiled. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Peter saved her. Like he saved me. They’ve gone now. Gone to…’

He paused, trying to explain it. The room warped, and a string of numbers ran across the walls. Adrian glanced at Bev, who nodded. Yes, she’d got them. Yes, they were co-ordinates.

‘How did he “save” you?’ asked Adrian, ‘You’re just a program, a building.’

‘A caretaker,’ explained Jacob, gently. ‘He made me feel… individual, like I was a whole, separate person, divorced from the routines of the hotel.’ He smiled wistfully. ‘He made me feel weak, crawling, a physical patient, and not a machine.’ He turned to look them both in the eye. ‘I liked that.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Adrian, ‘But this ends now. I have to turn off the light.’

‘By all means,’ replied Jacob. ‘The hotel will take over and I will be forced to edit you, and you will not remember anything of your purpose.’

Adrian hesitated. The light brimmed with anticipation.

‘We can’t help you,’ said Bev coldly. In the light the scars on her forehead and face were livid, distinct. She thrust her injuries upon him.

‘You must take me to him.’ Jacob’s lips pressed together in agitation. They did not answer him. ‘I need him to rescue me!’ he explained violently.

There was a long silence. Adrian glanced at Bev. Her eyes were hard. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said; it was a lie.

Jacob lunged at him. The light flared bright around him. Adrian felt his hairs stand on end. But the boy was only light and he passed through the Killoran. Realising his impotent position, Jacob stared and stared, and then burst into tears.

Adrian frowned. ‘Maybe we should –’

‘Not a chance,’ said Bev, standing. ‘I don’t care about him.’

‘Please…’ moaned the boy pitifully. But Bev would not even look at him now ‘Do it,’ she said, eyes like steel.

Adrian shielded his own eyes, opened the door, and walked into the lamp cage. The harshest of light excoriated his eyeballs. The heat was intense; he felt the skin under his fur begin to blister. Steam rose from him. He opened the panel in the floor and flicked every lever. Nothing

happened. The light blazed on, etching itself into his skin, cutting in like a scythe. He was beginning to feel faint already, the pure whiteness battering at his thick skull. Impulsively he reached out and touched the lamp. And found he could not move, held immobile in the light. It shone into his brain, seeing all, picking through every single memory he had ever experienced, taking them all. As it washed over them, it neatly and cleanly began to erase them. He would be sterile, clean, and vacant as a blank new card. He was being eroded. He would become an animal again.

A voice shouted at him, but he could not make out the words.

He tried desperately to wrench his palm from the light. It burned into him, filling him up.

The voice shouted again. He struggled to decipher the words. Gritted his teeth, growled in pain and defiance. The boy ran away, fading into the smoke. The boy ran away, fading… The boy ran away… The boy ran… The boy… The…

'Smash it!' yelled a voice, yelled his friend, yelled Beverley.

Summoning all his strength, concentrating only on the echo of her voice, he slowly raised his two great paws – 'I will not forget him!' he roared – and brought them down onto the lamp with as much force as he could muster.

The lamp shattered, spraying heat and intense light everywhere. He felt glass splinters cut sharply into his skin.

Free of the influence, he threw himself from the cage.

A shrill scream erupted from Jacob; he writhed and twisted in the throbbing beam. 'It hurts!' he cried as he truly felt all that he had ever taken.

Then the lamp flared with a searing whiteness, once, so bright their vision was bleached away, and abruptly cut off. The natural light of day gradually eked into their eyes. It took some time. Adrian saw they were all pink with burns. Bev, huddling into his fur, pulled away and looked about, amazed to be alive and sane.

Jacob mewled on the floor, hands about his head, like a newborn.

Slowly, carefully, testing every limb to make sure it wasn't damaged and that she was really Beverley Tarrant, she stood. Though Adrian had only smashed one screen, the lamp was in a thousand and one glittering fragments, scattered across the cage floor. It was, she was thankful to see, irreparable.

Her vision still blurry, she blinked, and some focus came back to her. She turned and looked out, down at the beach, the sea blue and glistening and calming. The hotel…

'Look,' she said, wondrous.

The tasteless pink hotel was a blur in her imperfect sight, but she could tell even at this distance that it was melting, the walls seeping

with water, dripping with all the myriad pasts it had swallowed and was now spewing out.

Adrian came to stand beside her, and they watched it die with a great amount of pleasure. Its end became clearer as their sight became stronger.

There was a rustling behind them as Jacob sat up. He gazed about himself, bewildered. He stared when he saw them. ‘Hello?’ he said, ‘Who are you?’ He searched the broken room again for some hint of remembrance, but nothing came to smooth his confusion. ‘I seem to have forgotten something,’ he said.

They did not speak to him. They turned away, looked out to sea.

The waves crashed on the shore.

Chapter Six

The shuttle was just an hour's walk from the lighthouse. They could have seen from the cliff top, if only they had looked. Adrian got them out of orbit and course, Bev feeding the numbers into the system. Then, having dispatched report back to Braxiatel, they could tend each other's wounds.

Adrian tied up her injured shoulder, and she picked glass splinters from his skin, and carefully bandaged his wounds. Some sheepish words were exchanged but after that they didn't speak.

They had left Jacob in the lighthouse. Adrian felt no guilt over leaving the boy, he did not consider him at all. He was simply a shell, to join with all the others that had washed up on that lonely beach. All he had was the abiding memory of Peter that he had stolen. Henrietta, he presumed, had been swallowed by the sea's fury, become a memory herself. Adrian didn't care. What they had done could not be forgiven. They had killed so many people… and they had hurt his son.

At least they knew that Ms Jones and Peter had escaped. And, if Jacob really did have some link to Peter, there was hope that they would find them yet. Adrian was optimistic. It made sense; Braxiatel had even said that Ms Jones might go to ground in 'enemy' territory, perhaps even sell out the Collection in exchange for a new life.

So why this stop-off? Well, it was along the way. But there was a terrible suspicion in him that Ms Jones had deliberately lured them to that place of forgetting. Had she seen a way of securing her disappearance, rubbing out her trail, erasing her and Peter's very existence from their memories? Those murmurings and sightings on various worlds had to have come from somewhere. Had she planned this for them? Was she that callous, that ruthless, that afraid? He shrugged away the questions he could not answer, became stalwart. All he knew, instinctively, was that Peter was alive, and out there, somewhere in the darkness. He would find him. If it took years he would find him.

He looked down at Bev. Her chest rose and fell with musical regularity. Some questions he knew the answers to. They would soon be docking with the ship that would run their route, that would take them home. He hoped Benny, and even Jason, had had better luck than they'd had. He hated the thought of failing her. The look of disappointment as her face fell would be too difficult to bear. But he gained some comfort in having Bev here. He didn't know why, perhaps she was just companionable; he liked her company, even when she slept.

He looked down upon her. She was smiling in her sleep. He wondered what she was dreaming about. He settled himself in his seat; he'd just rest his eyes for a second. Goddess knew he needed it. Yet he was still alert and primed for the slightest danger; not until they reached Thuban would he begin to feel relief. He reached out for her hand, and closed his eyes. Within moments he was asleep.

Parallel Lives (III)

By Simon Guerrier

‘I’ll get that shall I?’ he heard Joseph say. No answer, just more crashing about.

The door opened, and Hass bowed curtly to the metal sphere weaving in the air in front of him.

‘Do come in,’ said Joseph. ‘I believe you’re expected.’

Professor Summerfield’s rooms were in complete disarray. Worse than usual, Hass thought. Clothes of all kinds were strewn about the floor, odd shoes – very odd shoes, in fact – and accessories jumbled on top of them. Three different kinds of carrying case lay upturned in a corner. A fourth arced through the air from the bedroom, and clattered down on the others.

‘Professor?’ asked Hass, venturing forward. He could never remember the etiquette. Was it bad to see a human woman in her sleeping chamber, or was it bad not to? He had to remind himself that, whichever the case, Bernice probably did the opposite anyway.

He liked Bernice. He liked her for her concern and care, for taking the trouble to befriend him. He liked the vehemence with which she insisted he take part in the Collection’s various strange happenings – parties to celebrate nothing, meals in silly clothes, all manner of customs and traditions that had not been on the Collection for any longer than he had. But if there was something about her he loved, it was her temper. She was a warrior, through and through.

His pincers tried to grasp the flimsy undergarment she’d just thrown at him, to free it from where it had caught in the shoulder-joint of his cold-suit. He couldn’t get purchase, and only managed to tear the thing.

‘Bernice,’ he said, trying to calm her. This animal wildness would not do any good here. There would be time for that.

‘I haven’t got time to natter,’ she said, her voice unlike her own. He watched her struggle her way into a pair of stiff, uniform trousers, fail to fasten them around her middle, then struggle out of them again. It must have been some years since she’d last worn fighting clothes. Hass, a gardener, who had turned his back on most of his people’s soldiering ways, still checked he fitted into his armour at least once a week.

‘Mr Braxiatel has heard from Jason,’ he said.

‘Whoopee for him,’ she said, haring through a drawer of undergarments and wriggling from those she had on. She stopped

suddenly and looked at him, as if aware of his presence for the first time. He looked quickly away, sure he wasn't meant to witness her bony, lithe nakedness. But she had volunteered it to him.

Under a chair, half hidden by a discarded skirt, Hass saw Wolsey, cowering. The cat used to be a constant visitor to the greenhouses, where there was a spot that caught the sun all day. But he had not been to see Hass lately, and had taken to sprawling in Bernice's window boxes rather than venturing outside. The poor creature looked miserable now, where once he would have waned and run about until Bernice calmed down.

'Jason says he will meet you on the way.'

'Great,' said Bernice, hauling on the leggings of another armoured suit. This one fitted her, and she quickly pulled on a Marosa jacket, the pockets brimming with survival equipment.

'Well?' she said.

Hass appraised her. Bernice had had military training, he knew, but this was something different. The anger that boiled away in, the animal wildness… 'You look magnificent,' he said.

She snorted. 'I don't care what I look like. Are you going to let me have it or not?'

'It is an honour,' he said, as he handed her his gun.

Static played across Braxiatel's face. Jason Kane tried not to think how the signal was reaching him. 'She's just left,' he said. 'You don't want to be late for her.'

'Bad mood, is it?' Jason replied, trying to sound calm as he fought with the flight-stick of the interstitial fast-jump capsule. The thing buffeted through warp space at ludicrous speed, and he couldn't actually be sure that anything he did to the controls made any sort of difference. 'I wouldn't blame her, you know.'

'Jason,' said Braxiatel wearily. The same infuriating tone that always made Jason want to -

That always gave Jason a headache.

'Come off it, Brax,' he said. 'If Ms Jones kidnapped Peter, then of course Benny's out for blood.'

'You have to stop her, Jason,' said Brax.

'No I bloody don't.'

'Jas-ixqqq,' said Brax, and his face strobed as a black hole or something came between them. No, it was the shuttle cresting back into normal, material space – and whatever link Brax was using had to catch up. 'Qqqq– what it'll do to her.'

'If you say so. I've got her in front of me.' The screen offered multiple views of the shuttle: its title and manifest details; the best path for docking; the stats of the one crewmember on board. Jason

knew those stats by heart.

'You have to stop her doing anything she'll regret later,' said Brax. 'Think what it will do to Peter if he sees his mother gunning down his old nanny.'

Actually, the bloke had a point. 'Okay, Brax, I'll do what I can.'

'Charm her, Jason. I'm sure you'll get through to her.'

'Sure,' he said, and the connection was cut. Blimey, things were getting desperate if Brax was handing out compliments.

He docked, expertly, scratching the hull only slightly. It took an age for the pressure to align, but then he was out of his seat and bounding through the airlock. The shuttle smelled faintly of lavender.

Jason stood up close to the inner airlock door, fidgeting on his feet as he waited to be let through. He imagined the various scans and checks picking over his body, though he actually couldn't feel anything. He pictured Bernice, desperate, haggard with worry, and pitiably grateful to see him. They still had a few hours ahead of them before they reached orbit. He knew what she needed. He could feel it stirring in his pants.

Without warning, the airlock doors heaved apart, and he squinted to see through into the low-lit gloom of the ship. Bernice stepped forward, kitted out in a mixture of armies' fatigues. She looked aged, desperate, haggard with worry.

'Hey…' said Jason.

She punched him squarely in the face.

He tumbled backwards, dazed, slowly aware she was on top of him, hitting, punching, kicking and biting. He tried to hold her off, tried to make sense of all she was shouting.

'Hey!' he said. 'Hey!'

And suddenly she was off him, stood over him. A teardrop splashed down from her face, bursting on his.

'Look…' he began. The silhouette of her head slowly shook. Her voice, when she spoke, was raw and broken. It hacked through him like a knife, though he had to strain to hear the words.

'Where the fuck were you?' she said.

Jason and the Bandits
or
O, Jason, Where Art Thou?

Dave Stone

Prologue

The crystal-blue sea lapped against variegated, banded sands that seemed to shimmer in the warm light of the sun; waves of rainbow washing over the beach.

Shamanthra rested the palm of a hand on the palm tree under which she sat, and it obligingly dropped a coconut.

The tree was not exactly artificial, but it had been biologically engineered, at great expense, to a state just this side of impossibility. The coconut had an easy-open flip top and contained rum punch, perfectly chilled by way of heat-sink microstructures in the shell.

Shamanthra sipped her punch, which seemed to be strawberry-flavoured this time, and lay back with a sigh on the fine and intricately woven silk that served her as a beach towel. It was good to be free, for a while at least, of her responsibilities; it was good to feel that she was alone.

To achieve that feeling, of course, was somewhat difficult in an increasingly overcrowded galactic spiral arm – even more so, in a sense, if you were rich enough to stand a chance of achieving it in the first place.

Not, of course, that Shamanthra was rich.

Daddy was rich, naturally, but she herself took no interest in such things in the slightest. Even if she were wearing something other than her little one-piece bikini thong,[1] she would not be carrying any money in her pockets.

1 Which had, in actual fact, counting its unique design by a team of the best and most exclusive designers, hand-fabrication by the best and most expensive of couturiers, and not to mention the sheer logistics involved in having her automated dressing room present it to her the very instant she idly decided that she wanted something like it, set Daddy back the equivalent of the gross national product of a small planetary colony.

She had only a vague idea of what pockets were, in fact. They turned up on or in her clothes, sometimes, the clothes presented to her by her dressing room back at Homestead, but she never knew quite what she was supposed to put into them.

In any case, if you were rich enough – or if Daddy was rich enough – there were any number of security coordinators or guards or robotic drones who were forever trying to tag along after you wherever you went.

This could become inexpressibly wearying. To visit any of the well-attended tourist attractions of events, apparently, laid one open to all kinds of attack.

Shamanthra couldn't for the life of her imagine why – it wasn't as if she herself, as we've said, ever carried any money of which she might

be robbed. Daddy had all the money. Why on any of the various Earths should some assailant waste his time coming after her?

And it is this aspect of her character, of course, that will make sense of the following story. There really are people this clueless. I once knew an otherwise intelligent and personable person, years ago, who genuinely could not understand why people would shop at KwikSave when the food at Waitrose was so much nicer.

He absolutely could not understand the realities of living below a certain income. It was like a complete mental block – rather like an acquaintance of a friend, who had found a route bicycling from her house to her work that was all downhill, and was then forever trying to find an all-downhill route back…

Anyhow.

The solution to intrusive security measures, for the rich, had been to build what were effectively private pleasure planetoids, innately secure in and of themselves. They did not appear on any star maps, save for those within the guidance systems of dedicated lightspeed pods. Their cores were packed with sensors and monitors. Their skies crawled with the star-simulating satellites of passive defence grids – passive until the point where they had cause to activate like nobody's business and blow any and every possible threat out of the sky.

The key to this was invisibility, and Shamanthra of course knew none of it. She simply knew that this planetoid was a place to which she could come when she did not want to bothered by the somewhat smothering attentions she found in Homestead.

Daddy had taken her here when she was a child, and it was, now, the single place he let her go on her own. She lay back, watching the wheel of gulls that for all she knew were perfectly natural inhabitants of this island bounded by a crystal-blue sea. What she thought of as the sun continued on its slow traverse through the afternoon towards evening, when a gentle sound of crickets would start that did not sound like a recording at all.

Possibly it was the effect of the rum punch (the alcohol content of which had molecularly capped, under chemical Parental Control, to give a generally soporific rather than inebriative effect) but Shamanthra fell without realising it into a light doze.

She would never know how long it was before a sound like a thunderclap jerked her awake. Something, a meteor perhaps, was falling from the sky. As it came nearer, it became somewhat more distinct as something metallic. A ship of some kind? Shamanthra had no idea what ships looked like from the outside, save for the lightspeed pod that had brought her here and was currently waiting for her, out of the way in orbit.

This ship, from what she could make out, certainly didn't look like

the lightspeed pod. It didn't seem to be under power. It was just falling.

As it came closer, small jets of fire burst from its underside and it banked in the air, coming to rest on what looked to be the far side of the island, hidden by the various promontories and foliage and the miniature inactive volcano that made the island such a romantic idyll.

Such a thing, here on the island, was entirely new in the experience of Shamanthra. She didn't feel any fear, though, for the simple reason that she had never, knowingly, found herself in a fearful situation in her life.

Leaving her coconut shell and silken beach blanket behind, she padded off the soft sand of the beach and into the cool jungle beyond. There was nothing dangerous living in there, to the point where the possibility that something might never so much as crossed her mind.

What she found, on the beach at the other side of the island, was indeed a ship – though it was not exactly a prepossessing ship. It was battered and rust-bitten, and even Shamanthra could see places where such items as engines and sensor packs were missing. She could also see the blood-red, dripping skull-and-crossbones daubed on its side.

Gosh, thought Shamanthra, who in some respects was not entirely ignorant. Pirates! Whatever can pirates be doing here?

She soon found out. A little way off from the ship were several quite scrofulous individuals, busily digging a hole. They wore leather and brocade and scraps of body armour, no two outfits the same.

'That's the way, lads,' a big, bearded one in a hat was exhorting his fellows. 'There's the very place for us to bury our ill-gotten booty, or my name's not Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo, the dastardest, blastedest space pirate, there, in the ole space lanes!'

'Yar!' his industriously excavating fellows agreed. 'Yar, yar and yar for luck! Grease 'er up and pass the tobacco!'

'Brings a tear to me eyes an' no mistake,' continued Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo, the dastardest, blastedest space pirate in the ole space lanes, in musing tones, 'how many hundred men, women and children died, in screaming bloody agony, at our hands for this here loot? Should have been *thousands* more like – the bastards got off lucky.'

'Yar!' agreed his hectically burrowing cohorts again. Tar, yar, etcetera.'

'Yes, I do believe that this here haul will fund our murderous rampage of rapine, looting and hideous slaughter throughout this here galactic centre,' said Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo. 'I believe we – hello? What do we have here?'

His good eye, the one without the eyepatch, had espied Shamanthra, who gave a small 'Eep!' of alarm and tried to back off

into the jungle foliage, fetching up against a palm.

The palm, reading her biomorphic signature, obligingly dropped a coconut. Chocolate-milk flavour, as it turned out.

The space pirates, as one, turned to stare at her, speculatively.

'Isis a girl,' said an old, wizened, bald-headed one. 'An'o a right tasty lookin' flippertigibbet at that, what with that there thong leaving nothing to the imagination an' all!'

There was a rough murmur of agreement. Right tasty-looking flippertigibbets, with swimming costumes leaving nothing to the imagination, were obviously the space pirates' cup of tea, tot of rum or beverage of choice.

'Let's get her!' suggested the wizened old pirate, and there is no doubt that things would have gone quite badly, at this point, for the lady Shamanthra if I hadn't been on the scene.

Hi there, it's me. Jason Kane at your service.

You see what I did back there? Slipping seamlessly between Shamanthra's viewpoint and the authorial Voice of God, putting on a formal tone so you'd never guess it was me talking to you rather than a third-person narrative. And I did it brilliantly, didn't I, without so much as a single slip. That's skill, that is.

The reason is that, for a number of reasons, this prologue just wouldn't work if you knew it was me talking to you. It would take you right out of the moment and have you thinking up all sorts of questions that, frankly, I don't feel like answering. At least, not for the moment.

We'll be going back to it in a moment, so whatever you do, don't think of me as sitting here and writing it. Or sitting here with a nice glass of something beside me and dictating it transputronically, as it happens.

Got all that? Good. Carry on…

'Let's get her!' suggested the wizened old pirate. As one the space pirates began to advance upon the luckless Shamanthra, and there is no doubt that things would not have gone hard for her indeed – had not a firm and manly voice at this point cried out.

'Hold hard, you filthy curs!' the voice cried out, in its aforesaid firm and manly fashion. 'I've stuck by you all through thick and thin, held my tongue at your foulest excesses and depravities, single-handedly saved your miserable necks on more occasions than I can count – but this is going too far! Up with this, I tell you, and not to put too fine a point upon it, I shall not put!'

The speaker was one of the pirate band, dressed more or less in the same fashion as the others and whom Shamanthra had not particularly noticed amongst them – although, now, looking at him, Shamanthra wondered how she could have possibly failed to notice him.

Tall he was, and ramrod straight in his heroic wrath, with muscles

of steel, eyes of flint and a knob of butter.

What?

Benny, I'm trying to dictate, here – will you please stop heckling? Look what you made one do. Ah, well, sod it. It'll come out in the edit. If I don't forget. Anyhow…

Muscles of steel, eyes of flint and, uh, even under these distressing circumstances there was an aspect of charm to his demeanour that suggested he was fully capable of showing any young lady a good time. Several, probably. And he had. More than you've had hot dinners. *Oh, are you going? Close the door on your way out.*

'That's for disrespecting a lady, Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo!' our stalwart hero exclaimed, planting a well-aimed fist on the bearded pirate's nose.

'Cripes!' The bearded pirate clapped his hands over his nose in an attempt to staunch the bleeding. 'Right on the beezer! Teach 'im a lesson, me fine piratical buckos!'

With that, with many brutish growls, the pirate band fell upon their former comrade turned turncoat. There followed a blur of motion which Shamanthra found herself unable to catch, the meaty thwacks of fists and feet connecting with flesh – and the brutish snarls turned to howls of pain and alarm. Within an instant, the fiendish space pirate horde lay in a groaning heap at the young man's feet.

'Teach me a lesson, would you, you rotters?' he opined, standing there with his powerful and decidedly shapely, in a masculine kind of way, legs firmly athwart. 'Well, there's a lesson for you. Now, get out of my sight before I'm forced to teach you another one.'

'Let's scarper, lads,' quavered Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo. 'I'm all done in.'

'Yeah,' said the bald-headed wizened one. 'That Mr Kane, he's a right tiger when his dander's up. More than a match for us, even if we all gang up on 'im together!'

The space pirates ran for their battered old ship like the cowardly wretches they were. Presently, it blasted off from the beach and tore into the azure sky as though all the hounds from a hell dimension were after it.

After the pirate ship was lost from sight, Shamanthra crept down onto the beach and, tentatively, approached the heroic young man, still standing there, a faint smile playing on his lips.

'That was… amazing,' she ventured. 'The way you rescued me. I was particularly impressed by the way you barely seemed to touch those iniquitous buccaneers and yet every single one of them fell down. Is there… anything I can do to repay you?'

The young man assayed a slight bow. 'Your good wishes and gratitude are payment more than enough,' he said. 'Jason Kane at

your service. And now I must –'

The smile left his lips and he staggered.

'I fear, lady,' he said, weakly, 'that my fight with those unutterably despicable rogues has weakened me more than I realised. I'm afraid that I am feeling not at all well…'

He pitched forward, in a dead faint, into Shamanthra's arms. Try as she might, she could not bring him out of it.

Indeed, he remained in such an unconscious state all through the time that the lady Shamanthra called down her lightspeed pod from orbit, wedged both Jason and herself into it and transported them back to Homestead where, in the comfort and security of her bedroom, she as a desperate last resort attempted to give him artificial respiration and the kiss of life. It was only then that he returned from the arms of Morpheus to any real extent.

It was pure coincidence that this happened to be at just the precise same time that Shamanthra's parents, Lord and Lady Trolltrundler, owners of the largest slunk-processing concern in the Ithica Secondus outpost of the Proximan Chain, burst into the room demanding who he was, where he had come from and precisely what was going on.

This is what he told them.

At least, this is his story and he's sticking to it.

Chapter One

Well, now, I've already told you how I came to be in a situation with your lovely young daughter that might – if one were not in full possession of the facts be regarded, in a certain light, to have the faintest breath of not being completely and utterly uncompromising. And how, first appearances aside, anything you might have seen – or might, for that matter, have been picked up by the security cameras – has an entirely innocent explanation.

Now that's sorted out, I suppose I should make some mention of how I came to be inveigled into such a sorry state of affairs, with all the pirates and the whatnot, in the first place.

It is a tale long and gruelling in the telling… but all right, I suppose I can cut it down and just give you what I believe, in the low and common circles of those who ought to know better, is known as the skinny…

My name's Kane, Jason Kane, and I'm currently living on the Braxiatel Collection. For the most part I lead a life of modest temperance and quietude, and it's unlikely you'll have ever heard of me, or find so much as a trace of me on the Galactic Security Service registers. Why, I have to confess to being a little unsure as to what one has to do to get onto the Galactic Security Service registers in the first place. Something suitably nefarious and sordid, I have no doubt.

My work? Well, I suppose you could call me something in the media – in a financial capacity behind the scenes, of course. I have no desire to inhabit the limelight. High-quality period drama and documentaries for the most part. No rubbish. Emphasis on information and education. You can certainly learn a lot from my productions, or so I'm told, in any case.

What do you mean 'that's one way of putting it'? I challenge you to say that Xenomorphic Bondage Slaves XIV *doesn't have the social and aesthetic qualities that elevates it to the level of art. I've never been ashamed of what I do – I'm just trying to recreate what I more or less said to this Lord Trolltrundler guy, okay? So Brax can run it past his Ontological-legality Department. That's the point of all this, after all.*

Anyway, I thought you'd gone off to do something else. Oh. You just went out for some peanuts. Well, just sit still and try to eat them quietly – and I'd appreciate it if you stopped throwing the shells at the back of my head.

I was out in the Tarsas Nebula, the other side of Glomi and the Cool Cheese Confederation, on Praxis IV. I'd been called out, very last

minute, very much an emergency-need-type-of-thing, to oversee the shoot of ony of my, er… historical epics, which was cost effectively using the local talent. That is, I was until I found out that the local talent were in fact slaves, owned by a local criminal gang boss, Oinky Pete.

I'd made my opinions known about that, and me and my people had effectively, been kicked off the set. The production, in short, was carrying on in ways not suitable for respectable and tender ears – in a manner, suffice it to say, that we could not in all conscience allow to continue.

Oinky Pete had control of these girls by way of their families – their kids and crippled brothers and frail old grannies and whatnot; holding them hostage so as to force the girls to do absolutely anything at all. It was this aspect of the affair that had annoyed us, me and my people, and had us deciding that something must be done.

And it wasn't anything to do with the victims being girls at all. We'd have done it for anyone, naturally, out of the purity and not to mention kindness of our hearts.

Oh, yes, we bloody would.

The problem was that Oinky Pete – as you can probably surmise from the name – was a Piglet Person. And the thing about Piglet People, whichever the area of life in which they trot, is that they're forever trotting into people who can't see them as anything other than a midget dressed up as a pig dressed up in a suit. This means that they tend to overcompensate. As a gang boss, Oinky Pete was so spectacularly vicious, so inclined to come it with the prejudicial retribution, that the local Praxis IV law was frightened to death of him and no help.

And this was why me and my, uh, production assistant, Mira, were hiding in an animatronic Shoggoth, together with a number of likely lads and lasses we employed for the purposes of personal security – and, incidentally, had nothing whatsoever to do with the so-called Plague Dogs we'll be meeting later.

A Shoggoth, as we all know, except for those of us who don't, is a great slimy monstrous Lovecraftian mutant star goat, crawling with tentacles, eyes on stalks and suchlike extraneous pseudopodia. Oinky Pete had decided that he wanted one, as part of the direction in which he saw the costume-drama production as going.

In this context, though, Shoggoths have the triple disadvantages of being:

1) Space going,

2) Several thousand miles across, and

3) Entirely imaginary.

The Praxis IV Practical Hentai Effects houses had done their best,

however, and had come up with a ganglionic collection of tentacles etc. roughly the size of an elephant. The compartments intended for its operators were just the ticket to hide in and gain access to Oinky Pete's compound when it was delivered.

All the same, it was a bit of a crush. It was fortunate for my reputation as a pure and scrupulously gallant defender of the fairer sex – excuse me, are you choking on that peanut? – that Mira's tastes in the more luxurious directions were exclusively concerned with young ladies of an athletic type, and everybody knew it. Otherwise, people might have been able to cast entirely unfounded aspersions.

Still, by the time Oinky Pete's guards had dragged us into the compound, the atmosphere inside the Shoggoth was stifling.

'It's a good thing,' Mira whispered, 'that we are both of us high-minded people, to whom the combined attractions of slimy Hentai monsters and a number of athletic friends – who, it's just occurred to me, are a mix of male and female friends – hold no attraction. What with being all so hot and sweaty in here.'

'Yes,' I replied, equally quietly. 'Particularly, given that it is so hot and sweaty, that none of us have very many clothes on.'

The minutes went by. The plan was to wait until their weren't any guards around then sneak out, find Oinky Pete's girls and their families and then just get the hell out – a simple, elegant plan, as the plans of genius so often are.

And I still say it would have worked, had it not been for the fact that a few minutes into it, with Oinky Pete's guards quite definitely still around, my personal communicator chose that moment to start shrieking.

'What the hell?' Mira hissed. 'Idiot! You should have turned it off!'

'I thought I had!' I replied, fumbling with the errant item and feeling not a little alarmed – not least because I distinctly remembered turning it off and locking it. Obtuse I may be, on occasion, but not quite as stupid as all that. There was not time, though, at this point, to quibble about it.

'Sorry, chaps,' I shouted, 'I've blown it! We're going now. Go, go, go!'

Those who know and love me know I'm modest as the day is long – if that day happens to be the longest of the year, on a planet where the diurnal cycle is weighted more towards day than night.

I could brag about how I all but single-handedly fought Oinky Pete's guards to a standstill, found Oinky Pete and gave him the thrashing he so literally deserved and spirited his girls and their families away from under his freshly blooded nose… but as I say, modesty forbids such a crass and self-serving singing of my own praises, so I shall not even

mention such things.

Suffice it to say that the rescue operation, under the planning and direction of my good self, was a resounding success.

Well, all right, I had some help of course, but I did more than my bit. My bit, anyway, most of it.

Well, frankly I didn't do all that much – I'm more of a planner than a fighter, okay? And to be honest, the plan involved Mira – who as you know is quite the high-powered Psionic – hitting everyone and everything we came across with a psychic blast and knocking them catatonic. After that it was a walkthrough.

Anyhow, it all came good, whether I completely stuffed up my part of it or not, so get off my back, okay?

The important thing, so far as my tale is concerned, is that we managed to make it back with our new charges to the Praxis IV port and our transport ship, I finally had a chance to check out my communicator.

'I told you I'd switched it off,' I said to Mira, waggling the communicator at her. 'The call must have come through on emergency override.'

I felt a sudden chill as I realised what I had just said. 'What could be so important as to come in on emergency override?'

I switched the thing on, and waited several minutes for it to dump the accumulated junk data from the half-day it had been off. The GalNet spammers' attack codes had undergone several generations of improvement – if that's the right word for it – and I was going to have to downlink a whole new suite of scumkillers when I had the time.

Eventually, I was able to access the actual messages. I opened up the Priority One inbox and scanned the contents:

'*Turn youre old printer ink cartriges into Viagra, arsk me how*,' I read. 'Dash it! The beasts have managed to hack into the emergency protocols. They put all our lives in danger back at Oinky Pete's just to send more junk mail. Dash them all to heck!'

'The only way they could do that, though,' Mira reminded me, 'would be to bump out a genuine emergency call. And incidentally, might I commend you for being the sort of upright, decent chap who would never deign to swear no matter how egregious the provocation.'

'Foul oaths and the taking of a deity's name in vain and such are the product of a paucity of mind,' I agreed, while checking the text buffer on my communicator and running reconstruction routines.

At length, I was able to reconstruct a halfway readable version of the original message.

'Oh, God…' I said, staring at it – forgetting my compunction against taking the name of deities in vain and such due to the extremity of the circumstances, as I'm sure anybody would understand and forgive

once they learnt how extreme those circumstances in fact were. Thirty-seventh Day Whompaterian Adventists, you say? How very interesting – I mean, how very laudable in this sinful day and age. We have all of us much to learn from the Swami Whompa, I'm sure.

'What is it?' Mira asked, concerned.

'It's Bernice,' I said. 'She's in trouble. I have to get back to the Collection. Dear little Peter's been abducted. Again.'

Chapter Two

The emergency call had come from a very great friend of mine, Bernice Summerfield. Yes, that name from all those jokes of a distressingly intemperate nature. And, yes, as it happens, she does happen to be a professor, technically.

It's merely one of those coincidences, however, one of those names that parents saddle their children with, out of sheer naivety or the desire to make a cruel joke, like Theresa Green or Michael Hunt. Though I couldn't so much as begin to tell you why the latter might be funny, I'm sure.

Suffice it to say, my good friend Bernice – unfortunate naming aside – bears no relation whatsoever to the stories of someone who, of course, in actual fact has never existed.

Okay, okay, maybe I should have got into whether you were the real deal or not – is it my fault that in a large portion of the galaxy your name's only known like Paul Bunion or whatever, and for only one thing?

It's not my job to run spin for the Legend of Benny Summerfield – I get into enough trouble being your Bosie, sometimes, and I'm not gonna start making it worse by being your Boswell.[2]

2 It has always been something of a bugbear to the Great Lady that a lot of people only know her name from a number of jokes of the 'who's that fat bloke up there with Our Wally' variety. These so-called jokes follow pretty much the same general structure and include:

Professor Bernice Summerfield walks into a bar with a rat on her shoulder. 'What are you doing with that filthy, disease-ridden vermin?' asks the barman. 'Shut up and give me a beer, you bugger,' says Professor Bernice Summerfield.

And not to mention:

Professor Bernice Summerfield walks into a bar with a horse. 'Why the long face?' asks the barman. 'Shut up and give me a beer, you bugger,' says Professor Bernice Summerfield.

… and of course, the perennial:

Professor Bernice Summerfield walks into a bar with the ghost of a dog who bled to death after catching his tail in a revolving door. 'I'm sorry, we don't retail spirits here,' says the barman. 'Shut up and give me a beer, you bugger,'says Professor Bernice Summerfield.

Benny, as I like to call her, was one of those unfortunate fallen women, who are no better than they ought to be and have had a child out of wedlock. I had taken her under my protection, little though the sins of her character and flesh deserved it, purely out of the charitable goodness of my heart.

Ow!

In any case, I regarded Benny and her child as the closest thing I had to a family, until such a time as I might be blessed with children of my own within the bounds of matrimony and decorum of course.

Love her as a sister or young niece as I might, though, Benny had something of a knack for getting herself into the most preposterous of

scrapes – and now her son, Peter, had been kidnapped. It was imperative that I make my way back to the Braxiatel Collection to sort it all out. Yes, I could have been there the whole time, looking after Peter. But I can't turn down work, and anyway Ms Jones is always happy to babysit.

Well, how was I supposed *to know?*

Anyway. The problem was that I currently had several young ladies, not to mention their families, on my hands. I couldn't very well take the transport ship back to the Collection, merely to take care of my own private business, and leave them in the lurch.

In the end it was decided that Mira would take the transport and get the girls and their families to some place of safety, leaving me to my own devices and to make my way to the Collection in the best way that I could.

I'd underestimated, however, the importance Oinky Pete had to the local economy. After the transport had blasted off– just in the nick of time, so far as they were concerned – the Praxis IV spaceport was locked down and I found myself declared a wanted fugitive.

(I hasten to add, of course, that 'wanted fugitive' I might have been – but I was a fugitive wanted by a corrupt officialdom in the pay of a criminal of the most loathsome sort. And this was as far, so far as I'm concerned, from any kind of criminality as it is possible to get.)

And this was why, to cut matters short, I found myself in a situation that would in ordinary circumstances be most repugnant to me. As a man of temperance and sobriety, I would rather be seen dead than in an establishment selling spirituous liquors…

Look, you can either stop choking on them every couple of minutes or stop eating them altogether, okay?

A bar, as I say, of the lowest and most disreputable sort. To give but one example: in most hostelries, I gather, on the more developed planets, you will find in some discrete corner a machine designed to filter intoxicants from the blood and leave one in a fit state to face the world outside when one has finished drinking.

As a secondary function, I'm reliably informed, such machines will test the blood involved for a variety of social diseases and, if those tests are passed, present one with a small printed certificate suitable for framing.

The machine in this bar – the Rat and Parrot, if memory serves – had been rigged to extract the alcohol back into the beer barrels and sell it again.

"Allo, dearie,' a woman of ill-repute said, nudging me with a plump elbow and sufficient force to spill my fortnightly ration of non-alcoholic ooglifruit squash.[3] 'Feel like a nice time. I'll let you fiddle

with me fancy pieces if you like.'

3 Two weak ones. Oh, dear me, I do apologise.

The woman was not exactly in the first flush of youth, in the same way that the planet Jupiter is not exactly small. Her complexion, so far as if could be made out under strata of white lead, suggested that a mechanised blood test would provide her not so much with a certificate as a Hazmat decal.

All the same, my sainted mother – may she rest in peace – brought me up to be polite and respectful to ladies of every kind, no matter how pitiful the circumstances to which they might have sunk.

'I fear you have been drinking, madam,' I said virtuously. 'And lips that touch liquor shall never touch mine.'

'Garn away with yer, then, yer namby-pamby, nimany-pimany littel milksop,' the fallen woman said, making a gesture I am quite ashamed to admit I even know the meaning of.

Off to one side, a group of ruffians were waving their pint pots and singing what I recognised as a sea chanty:

Fifteen men on a dead man's chest
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
Drink and the devil had done for the rest
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
The mate was fixed by the bosun's pike
The bosun brained with a marlinspike
And cookey's throat was marked belike
It had been gripped by fingers ten;
And there they lay, all good dead men
Like break o'day in a boozing den
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!

Fifteen men of the whole ship's list
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
Dead and be damned and the rest gone whist!
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
The skipper lay with his nob in gore
Where the scullion's axe his cheek had shore
And the scullion he was stabbed times four
And there they lay, and the soggy skies
Dripped down in up-staring eyes
In murk sunset and foul sunrise
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!

Fifteen men of 'em stiff and stark

Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
Ten of the crew had the murder mark!
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
'Twas a cutlass swipe or an ounce of lead
Or a yawing hole in a battered head
And the scuppers' glut with a rotting red
And there they lay, aye, damn my eyes
Looking up at paradise
All souls bound just contrawise
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!

Fifteen men of 'em good and true -
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
Ev'ry man jack could ha' sailed with Old Pew,
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
There was chest on chest of Spanish gold
With a ton of plate in the middle hold
And the cabins riot of stuff untold,
And they lay there that took the plum
With sightless glare and their lips struck dumb
While we shared all by the rule of thumb,
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!

More was seen through a sternlight screen…
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
Chartings doubtless where a woman had been
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
'Twas a flimsy shift on a bunker cot
With a dirk slit sheer through the bosom spot
And the lace stiff dry in a purplish blot
Oh, was she wench or some shudderin' maid
That dared the knife and took the blade
By God! she had stuff for a plucky jade
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!

Fifteen men on a dead man's chest
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
Drink and the devil had done for the rest
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!
We wrapped 'em all in a mains'l tight
With twice ten turns of a hawser's bight
And we heaved 'em over and out of sight,
With a Yo-Heave-Ho! and a fare-you-well
And a sudden plunge in the sullen swell

Ten fathoms deep on the road to hell,
Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!

… they sang, with such gusto and attention to the proper wording that, for a moment, if one did not know better, and for that matter listen to what the words were actually saying, one might decide that they weren't such bad chaps after all.[4]

4 There might have been a few updated variations in what the so-called ruffians actually sang – 'tension-line' for 'hawser' and so on – that I can't precisely reconstruct from memory. I'm stripping in the lyric of this supposedly famous song, though, from the versions available on GalNet to make a point. The point being, it's a lot less… jolly than you thought it was, isn't it

I could but only hope. With the port locked down there was no legitimate ship to give me passage. My only option was those ships that had no truck with the law of any kind – be it the unofficial law of Oinky Pete, or the official law of the security services that Oinky Pete had in his porcine pocket. The smugglers and slave traders and outright pirates that were so low as to not even be recognised by the criminal syndicates.

Such people, I had been reliably informed, frequented the Rat and Parrot. They were my only chance, now, of getting offworld – and I could only hope that I might find myself amongst the best of a bad lot.

After the ruffians had finished their song, with many hearty cheers and jeers amongst themselves for those who had done well or ill with the counterpoint, I sidled over to the man who had been leading the refrain on an accordion. 'Sidled' so far as my innately staunch and valiant demeanour could allow, naturally.

He was a large man, fully a head taller than myself, with a big, bristly beard.

'Good evening to you, sir,' I said politely. 'Might I be the first to congratulate you upon your musical prowess? It was near all I could do to stop myself dancing my feet off.'

'Oh, aye?' this bearded article said, in a deep, booming voice heavily laden with sarcasm. 'That sure does make my day, does that! To think my poor grindin's on the wheezebox might contribute to the terpsichorean pleasure of a fine young gentleman such as yourself does my withered old heart proud an' no mistake.'

'Look, do you want a drink or not?' I said.

'I'll have a flagon of ye ole rum,' the man said swiftly. 'Easy on the exotic spices and the ooglifruit peel. And my fine bonny lads here'll have the same.' The assembled ruffians gave another cheer.

Fortunately, while I might have been a fugitive in real terms, in terms of cash I was relatively flush.

Potables obtained from the bald and surly barman, the atmosphere

became slightly more companionable – in the sense that those here would cheerfully kill me to my face, probably, rather than sneak up behind me and stab me in the back.

'You can call me Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo,' said the bearded man. 'And I believe that I shall call you Jim.'

'Might that not,' I thought aloud, 'lead to some small degree of confusion? Considering the number of "Jim" sounds in Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-. bob?'

'No confusion at all,' said Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo. 'On account of, like, I'm a'gonna be the one calling you Jim. Now, what can I do for you, Jim?'

'Well, I have to admit,' I said, 'that I currently find myself in reduced circumstances. I'm looking for a berth on a ship. Would you happen to know of such a thing, on a ship heading Galactic nor' Norwest?'

Weeelll…' Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo sucked on his stained and peggy teeth. I noticed that his big bushy beard had been scorched in a number of places, possibly due to some previous application of burning tapers. 'It does just so happen that I'm the captain, you might call it such, of a tub headed in just that very direction. These likely lads here are my crew.'

The assembled ruffians cheered again. 'Mind my hat!' one of them called. 'Oh, damn, I'll never get to heaven now.'

What this meant, for me, was that Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo was the only option in the establishment. My spirits sank a little. With the iron will that is my watchword, though, I steeled my resolve.

'Your business, Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob…' I said, approaching the subject with delicacy. 'Would it happen to involve latching onto defenceless ships with grappling irons, boarding them and slaughtering all the innocents on board and making off with their booty… you know, things of that general kidney?'

'Why nothing of the sort, young Jim!' Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob exclaimed with a kind of jovial mortification. 'We're in what you might call the business of import-export. Articles and comestibles the like of which, for reasons passing human understanding, the authorities of certain planets tend to frown upon. Why, you might say that me and these here fine lads are in the business of providing a public service!'

So I had fallen into the company of smugglers. Given the alternatives, I supposed, I should have counted myself lucky.

'That sounds perfectly acceptable to me,' I said, biting back my abhorrence of all things venal and criminal. 'I should like to sign on.'

'Not so fast, young Jim,' Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob

growled. ‘I run a tight ship, see. A place for everyone and everyone in his place. What do you have to offer to our fine, merry band?’

This, I have to admit, gave me pause for thought.

What do you mean, I’m sure it did? I know how to do a lot of stuff, me, as you know very well. There’s lots of stuff I know how to do. So stop it with the tart opinions on how much stuff I know how to do, yeah?

The reason it gave me cause for thought was that, replete with the attributes and qualities appropriate to a perfectly respectable gentleman as I might be, I had to work out which of my myriad skills and attributes might be applicable for the wretched life of a criminal.

Having never in my life been in such a position, as I’m sure you understand, this took quite some degree of consideration.

‘I can pilot a starship,’ I said at last, ‘and I can do it well.’

‘As can I,’ said Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob, ‘together with my first to Billy-bob Bosun here.’

‘Aye,’ said a barrel-chested ruffian, presumably this Billy-bob Bosun.

‘And while it’s always useful to have a certain level of redundancy as a backup,’ Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob continued, ‘it’s not an indispensable priority for us to employ you just for that eventuality. Pieces of eight. Bottle of rum. What else can you do?’

I was a little taken aback. It’s one thing to stoop to common criminality, but another to find that the common criminals aren’t interested in you when you do. ‘I can make shift with the maintenance and repair of engines, I suppose,’ I offered. ‘If needs must.’

‘We have Psycho Jack Bumfrey the Chief Engineer for that,’ said Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo, gesturing towards the individual in ‘question, ‘and his assistant, Jethro “Molestrangler” Squinty.’ He gestured to another.

‘Pleased to meetcha,’ said the one, raising the brandy I had bought him in a sociable manner.

‘I like strangling moles,’ said the other. ‘Got any moles?’

‘Anything else you can bring to the table, Jim?’ Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob said.

‘I’m quite handy in a fight…’ I began, starting to feel a little bit desperate despite myself.

A number of brawny ruffians put up their hands.

‘I can cook a little,’ I said, on the basis that everywhere and anywhere one might go, people can always use a cook.

‘We tend to live on nutripaks,’ said Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob. ‘Not a lot you can do with nutripaks. And anything else we leave to the capable hands of Grueripper Scoggs, here, the ship’s master Sous Chef and Saucier.’

‘I can do haircuts…’ I said, with now quite definitely increasing despiration. ‘Have you met Master Edmund “Sweeney” Ketch?’ said

Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo.

'Well, I suppose I can mop the decks and clean out the heads,' I said, swallowing the last of my pride.

'Ye'll not be after taking my job!' a bald-headed, wizened individual cried, attempting to launch himself at me with such fury that, for all his frailty, he was only barely restrained by his fellows. 'That's my job, that is!'

'Oh, I give up,' I said, giving up at last. 'It's obvious that there's nothing here for me. I learnt how to do macramé as a child, if it's any use to you.'

'Macramé, eh?' said Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob. 'Macrame, did you say?'

'I tell you,' said Psycho Jack the Chief Engineer, nostalgically, 'it's been a powerful long time since I've seen some proper macramé, an' I'll tell you that for nothing.'

'Yeah,' said another ruffian. 'It does the heart good to see a fine example of macrame around the place. If you can't get any moles.'

'You're in,' said Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob, passing me a tankard of rum to seal the deal. 'Let's have a drink to seal the deal, eh?'

So astounded I was by the suddenness – and not to mention, I must say, ridiculousness – of this reversal, that I took a swig without thinking.

'Gragh!' I spluttered, spitting out the demonic substance that was anathema to every temperate and sobrietous instinct in my body – but it was too late. My head swam and I staggered.

'There was something… more than alcohol in that drink, wasn't there?' I demanded, trying to fix my gaze on Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob through the black and purple splotches exploding before my eyes.

'Oh, yes, Jim lad,' he said, grinning, before I lapsed into the howling blackness of a swoon. 'That's just in case you decide to change your mind before we get you onto the ship. Welcome to the Plague Dogs, me fine young bucko.'

And that was how I came to fall in with a collection of nefarious individuals who I'd obviously never met before in my life.

Chapter Three

Whatever it was that Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob and his band of ruffians had slipped into my fruit juice, it contrived to put me in a state of having passed out from being dead drunk. While having nothing whatsoever to do with alcohol, of course.

In any case, I emerged from the arms of Morpheus to find myself in a cell-like cabin, bare except for the pull-down bunk on which I lay, with the null-gray Cavorite-alloy walls and simulated-gravity deck plating that instantly identified it as a cabin on board a ship. The distinctive taste of recycled air and the subliminal hum of engine vibration told me that the ship was sealed and under way.

My first thought was that I must have been locked in, but the cabin's access hatch slid open under my hand. There were various crewmen in the gangways, going about their business of mopping balks and tinkering with the complicated innards behind maintenance panels.[5] It wasn't that they were actively ignoring me, but no one seemed inclined to start a conversation.

5 You'll see this so-called maintenance-activity happening on almost any ship you can name, once it's under way. The secret about it is that, by and large, the subsystems being tinkered with have absolutely nothing to do with controlling the ship and are, in fact, connected to nothing.

They're glorified activity-centres, basically, there so the members of the crew can practise their technical skills and stave off the sheer boredom of interstellar travel. This is why people seem to be forever working at these panels, no matter how smoothly the ship appears to be running – but can drop their work in an instant when something important comes up.

I have to admit to being a little puzzled, and feeling somewhat at a loose end. Aside from the fact that there was nowhere to go outside the hermetic confines of the ship, it was obvious that I was no prisoner or under guard. On the other hand, there was also a decided lack of people telling me to make myself useful, whether by handing me a mop or bucket or assigning me maintenance makework.

Eventually, and more or less for the sake of having nothing else to do, I headed forward to where I assumed the bridge to be. I found Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob sitting in what passed for the captain's chair with his feet up on a console. His boots were off and, believe me, there was nothing of a pleasant and salutary nature revealed by their removal.

'Wotcha, cock,' he said cheerfully. 'And how are you feeling this fine interspatial perihelion? You were totally putting it away last night and no mistake, me old son.'

I let this slur on my abstemious general character and demeanour pass without comment.

‘I can’t help noticing,’ I said, rather, ‘that your tone of voice seems to have changed from the last I remember. A certain lack of the “yo-ho-ho” and the “avast me scuppers”, if you take my meaning.’

‘Yeah, well,’ said Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob. ‘It’s always a good idea to come to it with the old piratical-sounding bollocks when you’re down among the rubes, but when it’s just between ourselves it’s all a bit of a pain, innit?

‘Likewise all that “Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob” nonsense. It might be just the ticket if you’re trying to impress the yokels, or bump up the word count in what’s, in the end, a pretty thin tissue of lies, but it’s not exactly convenient in real life, is it? “Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob, watch out for that man with a – oh, dear, too late, he’s dead.” When it’s just between us, you can call me Barney.’

‘Very well… Barney,’ I said. ‘And you can call me –’

Now if you’re about to be telling me what you might be calling your proper name, young Jim,’ said Barney, *nee* Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob, ‘then I’d advise you to have a think on whether it’s a name you’d like connected with the doings of the dreaded Plague Dog band.’

‘… you can call me Jim,’ I finished, a little bit lamely though I admit it myself.

‘Good lad,’ said the ex-Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob. ‘A true name would only be useful if we were to hold a fine gentleman like yourself hostage in the hope of ransom. Fortunately, for you, we couldn’t find a soul willing to pay a ransom for a body of that name… which leads to the knotty problem of what we’re going to do with you now.’

‘I thought you were going to set me doing macrame,’ I said, a little sourly I have to admit.

‘We were just having a laugh with you,’ Barney said, ‘as you know full well. Was it true what you said, though, back in the Rat and Parrot on Praxis IV? That you can steer a ship, none better?’

‘Well, that might be overstating the case,’ I said, since I am at heart a remarkably truthful and not to mention modest individual.

Listen, Benny, I really am not going to tell you again…

‘I can make my way around the controls of most of the common models, well enough to get you where you need to go. Just give me a bit to time to get used to the set-up.’

Forward of the captain’s chair, the barrel-chested man I’d been introduced to the night before sat at the pilot’s board, seat tilted back, hands clasped behind his head and emanating the snores of a light doze. The seat of the copilot’s station was empty. I slid into it and quickly scanned the readouts. As I had surmised, the ship was on

autopilot, heading for an area of empty and otherwise entirely unremarkable space were its infradrive would kick in.

The layout of the bridge and its control systems seemed to be pretty much standard, if unconscionably worn and dirty. An entire wall was taken up by a Dynamic Multistream Display screen, which threw up such relevant images as might be required from the ship's other monitor displays and readouts.

The screen was cracked in one corner, though, and stained with the dried detritus of what looked, basically, like someone throwing up. The controls themselves would not have looked out of place running a flight simulator on a child's gaming console from centuries past. And, like a child's gaming console, they were sticky with accumulated muck and spillages.

The set-up seemed generally serviceable, though – except for the glaring lack of one thing.

'I can't seem to find the PEC,' I said to Barney the Captain.

Captain Barney shrugged. 'The Pointlessly Exploding Console is more trouble than it's worth, Jim. The showers of sparks and the suchlike can start a fire that'll burn a feller's face off. And then the feller falls over and frightens people by showing them their face, scorched up like crazy paving, up close. Leads to panic, that does, in a confined space.'

He scowled. 'The Pointlessly Exploding Consoles kill more people than they ever save, and that's a fact, or my name's not Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo.'

I declined to mention that, in actual fact, it wasn't.

'Yes, but, as you know,' I said instead, 'damage taken by a ship under infradrive works entirely differently to a vessel operating in regular time and space. How do we get immediate tactile feedback that we've taken a hit without a PEC?'

'State this tub is in,' said Barney, 'believe me, we'll know about it. Or rather we won't – on account that one good hit, she'll fall to bits around our ears and have us disappearing, instantly, up our own singularity.'

Things, quite obviously, weren't as bad as I had thought they were on the Plague Dog ship. They were worse.

'I think I'd like to take a look at your engine room,' I said.

Captain Barney shrugged again. For a leader of men – however informally he seemed to spend his life completely unconcerned by, well, just about anything.

'Suit yourself, Jim lad,' he said. 'No skin off my nose. Knock yourself out, why don't you?'

Which was why, a few scant minutes later, I was dodging under a

monkey wrench wielded by Psycho Jack Bumfrey, the Chief Engineer.

'Less of that,' I rapped, taking the wrench away from him and giving him a nerve-deadening rap on the upper arm for good measure. Just a little trick I learnt during the last war but one, when I was involved in certain activities that must remain classified, but which I must allow might be deemed incredibly noble and heroic were they generally known.

All right, all right, maybe 'noble' and 'heroic' are stretching the point a bit – but I did not put on a frilly dress and hide up in the attic from the Draft Board. I really don't know how rumours like that get started…

'You miserable sneak,' Psycho Jack whined. 'Hurtin' a man like that when you can plainly see he'm be bereft of your natural advantages and superiority in the matter of combat.'

'Yes, well, let that be a lesson to you,' I said. 'Think on before attempting a cowardly assault upon your betters. And don't think I can't see you attempting to creep up on me with that screwdriver, Jethro "Molestrangler" Squinty. I tell you here and now it'll go harder for you than me if you do.'

'Can't blame a chap for trying,' Squinty muttered, dropping the screwdriver back in his toolbox. 'What with being a cowardly and phrenologically subnormal wretch who'd slit your gizzard with a billhook for a tobacco pipe without the tobacco, and not to mention an unhealthy fascination with the defenestration of small burrowing animals, and all.'

Having won the respect of the denizens of the engine room, by way of speaking the only language they could understand, I turned my back on them and examined the churning, coolant-leaking hulks of the engines themselves.

'Do my eyes deceive me,' I said at last, with some astonishment, 'or have you really got the contrivium conduits plugged directly into the reaction chamber?'

Psycho Jack the enginner looked shamefaced. 'Well, sir, the connectors seemed to fit in a right convenient fashion…'

'Convenient, you say?' I stormed. 'What you've got there is a recipe for the engines to break down at the worst possible moment, whatever that worst possible moment might be, over and over again. Do you call that convenient? Because I don't.'

Psycho Jack had his greasy leather cap from his head and was wringing it fitfully. 'I have to admit, sir,' he said, 'now you come to mention it, they always seems to cut out just when we'm about being ambushed by the InterPlanetPol Patrol, about to be eaten by a giant mutant space octopus, sucked into a black hole or things of that nature…'

'I'm hardly surprised,' I said. 'I suppose it never occurred to you to

pass the contrivium flow through a Mark Five Retrocrastinator?'[6]

6 Let me see if I can explain this without resorting to higher mathematics, or the terms used by some of the more populist authors on GalNet which, in the end, are just pure Fantasy:

A lot of modern star-jump technology operates, on the quantum level, so that the 'stories' of people's timelines end up where they're supposed to. Someone ends up in just the right time and place to affect a heroic and notable rescue, or die in the right war, and so forth. (We're talking about the minority of real people, in the Manichean sense, as opposed to the countless billions who just do pointless stuff and/or die in pointless ways, of course.

A Retrocrastinator-unit on an infradrive, basically, is the ontological equivalent of going over the first draft of a text in a word-processor, smoothing out the lumps, tweaking things and generally just glossing over the inconsistencies with waffle, so that everything turns out more or less all right in the end. You learn something new every day, don't you?

'Mark Five Retrocrastinator…?' Psycho Jack seemed completely at a loss. 'That thing over there,' I said, pointing. 'Painted bright blue. With "Mark Five Retrocrastinator" written on it.'

'Well, bless me!' Psych Jack exclaimed – although, I have to tell you, he used quite another word than *bless*. 'Bless me sideways with a big brass barometer and call me Doris, that's a stroke of genius! A stroke of genius like that would never have occurred to the vulgar and imbecilic likes of me!'

'Say no more about it,' I said, with the charitable egalitarianism that is my watchword, even among my base inferiors. 'Just make yourself useful and hand me that magnogalvanistic lug wrench.'

The above scene was repeated, with appropriate variations, over the next few hours as I worked my way through the ship.

In the galley I informed Grueripper Scoggs that it was probably not a good idea to serve dinochicken raw.

In the armoury I demonstrated to Glomi K'zhan, the Master at Arms, how to assemble a rapid-pulse flenser rifle so that the ejector didn't backfire directly in the face of the operator.

In the ablutions units I showed the baldy-headed, wizened skivvy in charge of them the correct use for a pair of rubber gloves.

Such activities had me arriving at the considered opinions that (a) the 'dreaded Plague Dog band' were not in actual fact up to very much, or even so much as approaching basic competence, and that (b) it would only be a matter of a few more hours, at most, before I would be able to win over the crew in its entirety, wrest control of the ship from Captain Barney and use it to go wherever I liked. If it held together long enough.

Such considered opinions were, however, curtailed by the bark of the inboard tannoy.

'*Get your arse up here on the bridge, Jim lad*,' said the voice of Captain Barney. '*We've something that requires your so-called piloting expertise. We're coming up on another ship.*'

Chapter Four

The ship on the DMD screen looked like a passenger liner of the sort used mainly by the rich – and as such, it was a lot larger than it really needed to be. The pressurised capsule that accommodated the actual passengers and crew was surrounded by a complicated mass of compensatory systems to give them a smooth ride – or at least, the kind of exciting ride for which they'd paid their money.

The actual sensations involved when travelling in space, simply, are entirely different from what people commonly imagine – and if those people are rich enough, they'll damned well contrive a way of getting the sensations they want.

The problem with a complicated mass of compensatory systems, of course, is that the more massive and complicated they get, the more there is to go wrong.

'It looks like a micrometeor strike to the third quadrant interstitiality pod, precisely on the null phase of its phase cycle, which set off a cascade reaction in the TAC-three-turbulence stabilisation array,' I said, peering at what I could make out of the image on the screen under the detritus that covered it. 'The knock-on effect would have knocked out several key nodes of the Flobotnum Core, if I'm any judge…'

'And what would that mean, when it's at home?' Barney said. 'Bearing in mind that some of us here don't have the education of a fine young gentleman such as yourself.'

'The ship's broken,' I said. 'By the looks of it, they managed to launch all the life pods and leave it derelict…'

'Empty,' eh?' said Barney, with a kind of animal-cunning interest. 'Any way we can check, you know, with the radio thingy?'

Yet again, I wondered how it could be possible, with a captain and crew such as this, that their ship had so much as made it off Praxis IV and out into space. I fired up the comms rig, noted the lack of any wide-band distress signal and located the passenger liner's autotransponder to set up a ship-to-ship.

'What do you call the ship, Barney?' I asked. 'You know, the ship we're on.'

'Many and varied are the names used by the Plague Dog band,' said Barney, smugly. 'Each and every one of 'em designed to strike fear and terror to the hearts of lily-livered…'

'Just one will do,' I said.

'Well, many and oft times,' Barney allowed, 'we have gone under the nom de plume of the *Black Pig*.'

For various reasons that I don't propose to go into, this name

seemed depressingly apposite.

'The *Black Pig*?' I said. 'Really?'

'The *Black Pig*,' said Barney.

'Suit yourself.' I activated the ship-to-ship. 'Unknown passenger vessel, this is the private merchant vessel *Black Pig*. Do you require assistance? Over.'

No answer.

'They're not answering,' I said. 'Even on auto-respond. I don't think there's anyone aboard. At least, anyone in a state to walk and talk.'

'So,' said Barney, 'what you're saying is a decided lack of crew and passengers and armed guards who might sorely inconvenience any honest soul who might attempt to pick up any jewels and fine comestibles and suchlike trifles such as might be lying around for the taking?'

'That's about the size of it,' I said.

'Nobody at all?' said Barney.

'So far as I can tell,' I said.

'What the hell, then,' said Barney. 'Let's board her.'

The lack of any crew and passengers and armed guards who might sorely inconvenience any honest soul who might attempt to pick up any jewels and fine comestibles and suchlike trifles such as might be lying around was a distinct relief to me. For a number of reasons.

Since finding myself aboard the privateer ship, I'd been debating as to what I'd do if I found myself forced into participating in a pirate raid. What I'd have to do if I found myself in the midst of a Plague Dog band intent on taking some vessel by force and slaughtering all the innocents thereon.

It wasn't even as if I could simply turn my coat and join the opposing forces – innocents would still die no matter which side ultimately won. No. The only course of action I could see would have been to take on the Plague Dogs en masse.

This I could have done without breaking a sweat, of course, but I couldn't think of a way of doing it without killing all or most – and I place a high value on sentient life, even such lowly and barely sentient life as the Plague Dog band. Such drastic measures, I was of the opinion, should be saved for a last resort.

Uh, Benny… I think you might have lost the point of this narrative a bit. You know I'd never really have to take my guys on, so comments like, 'Oh, yeah, like a pig in a hat you could have taken on the lot of them,' don't actually apply.

That's not to say that, if I ever did find myself in the position of having to take the lot of them on, I couldn't. Oh, yes I could. Bet you anything you like. And what's that stuff about pigs in a hat supposed to mean, anyway?

Picking over the bones of a derelict, however, was not quite as reprehensible as all that. I adjusted the ship's rotation to match that of the passenger liner and maglocked us together, aligning an access hatch with our own, with a faint clang.

Billy-bob Bosun, who had been asleep this whole while, chose this moment to wake up.

'Are we there yet?' he said, blearily scanning his own readouts. 'What are we about, cap'n?'

'We's about to board that there stricken passenger ship,' said Barney, 'to offer such aid and succour as we might. Courtesy, I might add, of the nicest bit of piloting I've ever seen in my life from Jim here. Why, I doubt if one in ten thousand qualified pilots could have done such a nice bit of piloting considering he was using a set of controls and consoles and whatnot that before today he had never seen in his life!'

'It was nothing, really,' I said, because as I might have mentioned I have never been one to sing my own praises.

'It occurs to me, though,' I continued. 'That while you send your boarding party in, I should remain here on the bridge in case of trouble. Keep the engines ticking over for the eventuality that we might have to leave the vicinity quickly, that sort of thing.'

'Ah,' said Captain Barney, 'well, now, I think that might present a bit of what you might call a problem, Jim. A man of your obvious accomplishments, why, I do believe that he might be capable of flying this ship with no assistance whatsoever – at least, flying it far enough to reach some inhabited body and exchange it for ready coin. Now, I hasten to add that it's not a question of distrust, as such – I trust you utterly, Jim lad – but it's never a good idea to put a man in the way of temptation, do you see?'

Such an unworthy thought, of course, had never so much as crossed my mind, and it was quite hurtful that anyone would think it would. I was only prevented from bristling, and giving Captain Barney a piece of said mind, by the knowledge that, by his lights, he was merely being careful. A dishonest, back-stabbing wretch himself, in short, he did not believe that anyone could be anything else.

In fact, I had not volunteered to stay behind out of a desire to get away from the Plague Dog band – that would have left them stranded until they died, and, as I say, I have a profound respect for even the most worthless of lives.

Picking over the carcass of another ship like vultures, however, was not exactly the most decent of activities, and I had simply wanted to have my hands remain as unsullied by it as was possible.

What do you mean 'hypocrite'? Of course there's a distinction. Okay. Let's just say for the sake of argument, you find yourself in the situation

where you're absolutely forced to kill some guy. Do you shoot him cleanly in the head? Or do you go all, 'Ha, if I'm gonna be bad then I might as well go all the way. So let's torture him slowly to death and then take out his wife and kids for good measure – because at least that way I'm not being a hypocrite.'

Well, all right, the instances aren't comparable. But I still think, when it comes down to a flat choice between keeping your hands technically clean even though they're still metaphorically dirty, or getting them dirty in both senses, then it's better to choose the first – because in the end you still have nice clean hands.

In any case, that was how I found myself at the head of what might charitably be called a 'salvage squad', and what might with slightly less charity be called a 'raiding party', as we made our way through the passenger compartments of the liner.

Fortunately, in keeping with the principle that the lives of the wealthy people who are paying the bills must be protected at every cost – at least, every cost that left a tidy margin of profit – the compartments were still pressure-tight and the life-support systems still operational. We'd been able to kick start them with a minimum of fuss.

It was fortunate in the sense that, in any real life, there is nothing more dangerous of its type than working in spaces designed to be pressurised while wearing a pressure suit. The spaces are just too cramped and wrong for its bulk, with no end of hidden obstacles, sharp corners and snags. Think in terms of negotiating the dimensions of a toilet in an airliner, or a kitchenette in a caravan, while wearing several big overcoats.

Another good thing was that there seemed to be no sign of violence. The various passengers appeared to have decamped to the life pods and disembarked in a relatively orderly manner. The bad thing about that, though, was that they'd had time to take their truly valuable portables with them – all their tiaras and jewellery and suchlike treasures that could fit in a valise.

'Nothing much here but costume jewellery and other suchlike kickshaws, Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob,' I said into my walkie-talkie to Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo, who was down in the Purser's office with Psycho Jack Bumfrey, attempting to open up the safe with an oxyacetylene torch.

(I'd actually had to show them how to do it – having learnt the knack, some years ago, for entirely innocent and legal purposes – and then decided somewhat prudently to make myself scarce while they actually did it, on the good chance that they might blow us all to kingdom come.)

'*Never underestimate the value of costume jewellery and other suchlike kickshaws, Jim*,' said Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo. It was common practice to use our full piratical names whenever off the ship – even when there was no one around to hear them. It was all good practice, I suppose. *There's folk on the out-of-the-way worlds as'll pay a small fortune for flash – they prefer it to the real thing.*'

'I bow to your wisdom,' I said. And extraordinarily enough, I did.

Utterly negligible he might be in most respects – almost as if he were nothing more than a hastily invented and amalgamated, obfuscatory cipher who never actually existed in the first place – Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo had a fund of criminal knowledge that I myself could never so much as begin to assay, on account of being so honourable, honest and noble.

It wasn't worth relaying the information that costume jewellery and other suchlike kickshaws, though worthless to a discerning eye, were in actual fact worth taking. The rest of the salvage party, with eyes for bright and shiny things like jackdaws, were already and quite busily stuffing them into carry sacks with multiple and various exclamations of venal glee.

The only one of our small party who did not seem to be having a ripping time, apart from myself, was the bald-headed and wizened individual – whose name I really was going to have to learn at some point – who was looking around himself with a kind of constant, wide-eyed terror.

'Don' like this…' he was muttering to himself. 'Don' like this at all…'

'What's up with you, er, chap over there,' I said.

'I know what did this, cap'n,' the depilatorial ancient quavered. 'Killed all the crew, killed all the passengers, killed them all and chewed them up to nothin' with their little pointed teeth… it were the *space weasels*, cap'n!'

At the very mention of those dreaded, dreadful words the rest of the party shuddered with shock. There are some myths and superstitions amongst humanity – at least, that portion of humanity that has made it into space – that it seems will simply refuse to die.

'They jump out of the walls and run up your trousers and bite you, cap'n!' wailed the wizened individual. 'With their pointy needle teeth! We're all of us goin' to die! Killed and gobbled up by the… the… *space weasels*!'

I was going to have a panicked riot on my hands if I didn't do something fast.

'Settle down!' I thundered. 'You all know as well as I do that space weasels – there, I said it – don't exist! They were invented by superstitious souls whose minds couldn't cope with the crawling

horror of space-borne macrobacteria which infect entire ships, and lay their spores in the pancreatic ducts of the crew so that they hatch out in a catastrophically exploding manner while the unfortunate hosts writhe in agony and scream for the release of death! Take it from me, lads, these so-called space weasels of yours simply don't exist!'

My calming words appeared to have the desired effect. The party visibly settled.

'If you say so, cap'n,' said the bald and wizened man. 'I must allow, to hear the true and reasoned facts of the matter does a fellow a power of good.'

'Then let us hear no more about it,' I said, sternly. 'Space weasels, indeed!'

The most important thing about this exchange, of course, was that the bald-headed, wizened individual had without thinking about it referred to me as his captain throughout. This bore thinking about. For the moment, though, I did not get the chance – for my walkie-talkie chose it to begin shrieking out an alarm.

'What it is *now*, Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob?' I snapped, depressing the receive switch, wondering if the man had still in some manner managed to mess up the opening of the Purser's safe, despite my having explained in precise and simple steps how to do it.

It was not, however, Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo. It was his first mate, Billy-bob Bosun, who had been left in charge of the *Black Pig*'s bridge rather than myself.

'*They're coming for us!*' he bawled in craven panic. '*They're coming for me! Oh, please, dear God, somebody help! We're under attack!*'

Chapter Five

If there were any such things as gods – I beg your pardon, if there were any such things as pantheistic, nonexistent Pagan so-called gods which have nothing whatsoever to do with the One True God of Thirty-seventh Day Whompatarian Adventism – then I'd suspect that they were looking down on me and playing games at my expense.

Ever since I'd learnt of the distress of my good friend Bernice and her son a son whom I hasten to add had nothing to do with my good self in any progenerative sense, since I have taken a lifelong vow of chastity and…

Hello? Robo-Infirmary? Can you send a robomedic up here, because I think I've got someone here having a heart attack and… no, hang on, she looks like she's all right. Something must have gone down the wrong way.

Ever since I'd learned of the distress of my friend Bernice and her son, ever since it had become imperative that I catch up with her in time to help them, it seemed as if the gods – the nonexistent, irreligious Pagan gods, thank you for reminding me – had been placing obstacles in my path.

First the complications with Oinky Pete on Praxis IV, then finding myself on a privateer ship with no choice as to its activities or destination… and now an event that was not so much a roadblock in the path of my ambitions as a full-scale, fully armed blockade.

I mean that literally. I got my salvage party off of the derelict liner and pelted to the bridge of the *Black Pig* to find Captain Barny – the nonsense of Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo, of course, relinquished at the access hatch – in the process of wrestling his first mate, Billy-bob Bosun for the controls. It would transpire that the coward Bosun, when the ship was first attacked, had attempted to wrench it from the passenger liner and make a run for it.

Since this would have detached the umbilical connecting the two hatches, it would have catastrophically depressurised the *Black Pig* – which was in such a state of disrepair and neglect that it was missing several airlock doors – and left the majority of the Plague Dog band stranded on the liner and sitting ducks. It was therefore fortunate that, in the end, Billy-bob Bosun had been so inept as a pilot that he had not so much as worked out to fire the engines before Captain Barney and then myself had arrived on the scene.

Whatever else might be happening, this little wrestling match was the first priority. I dealt with it by the simple expedient of grabbing hold of both heads and cracking them together. Billy-bob Bosun, being the softer-headed of the two, collapsed into supine unconsciousness.

Captain Barney, being the thicker-skulled, rubbed at his bruised

head ruefully.

'Ye gods, man,' he said, in the low Pagan manner of the lout he of course was, 'you're as strong as an ox despite your deceptively slim frame – which no doubt gives far more athletic and gymnastic advantages than if you were merely muscle bound.'

Once again, modesty forbore to comment. My physical prowess, such as it is, is entirely due to the healthful living, bracing dips and regular exercise that comes as the result of a clean and virtuous mind.

Collection Infirmary? Yes, yes, it's me again…

'No time for that,' I snapped. 'Let's see what we're up against.'

The gutless Billy-bob Bosun had not even bothered to find out what we were up against, having panicked at the first hint of enemy fire from outside. I activated the DMD screen – and then rather wished I hadn't, despite even my own courageous nature.

Insectoid ships, hundreds upon hundreds of them were in the process, it seemed, of hazing into existence. Only a few of them were firing upon us… but soon those firing would amount to a thousand or more.

'The devils!' I exclaimed. 'Pardoning the language, if anyone here happens to be a devout Thirty-seventh Day Whompaterian Adventist or the like, but I trust they shall forgive such an outburst given the extremely trying circumstances. Unless I'm very much mistaken, these fiends have been lying in wait for us, using the stricken and derelict passenger liner as bait for a trap and cloaking themselves by means of one of the several varieties of cloaking device that are available on the black market!'

I frowned. 'I must admit, however, that the identification of the particular configuration of these ships escapes me…'

A mystery solved by the fact that, at this point, the ship-to-ship comms system began to blare. That wasn't mere hyperbole.

The fact is, in these days, that ship-to-ship communication tends to be personalised by those who are using it. There are any number of handshaking call signals that can be downlinked from GalNet depending on the taste and proclivities of those who are going to use them.

This can be useful in that, should one hear a communication starting with, for example, a tune intending to suggest an anthropomorphic frog pretending to ride a motorbike, you can fire up your cannons and wipe the excrescent source from the face of the universe without having to so much as think about it. In much the same way, this signal was tagged with a harsh and martial, blaring fanfare – undercut by a kind of sawtooth-jagged, brutal edge that had me in some sense loathing the originator of the signal before I ever knew who he was.

The fact that I knew, in another sense, that it was originating from one of the ships that were attacking us, was quite beside the point.[7]

7 It is well known, by those who know, that I originally grew up on Earth, the original Earth, and left it by means of various time-travelling jiggery-pokery in the early 1990s – a time when what was called Indie music actually meant something before, apparently, devolving into the self-parody of something I gather was called Britpop. At the time, the anathema to real music was a bunch of sad old superannuated fuc– I mean, sad old superannuated rockers, long-burnt-out on dope and their stories about midgets and whose only hope of release was to end up on some appalling reality-show or something. This is what, basically, the ship-to-ship call tag sounded like.

The face of someone basically – but only barely – human appeared on the DMD screen. It was crawling with piercings and tattoos, none of which could hide the fact that it was the face of one not exactly in the first flush of youth but refusing to admit it. It was a face one could imagine hanging around in certain bars – bars that I have heard tell of, naturally, without ever having been into one in my life – long after the band had gone and the sound system packed up, yearning desperately at the dregs of the night.

And, no, I hadn't got confused and was looking in a mirror rather than the display screen. Ha bloody ha.

'*Avast, you scum!*' the face growled, through a haze of static. '*Hove to like the scurvy dogs you are! Stand by to be boarded!*'

It might have been my imagination, but this voice seemed to strike a chill that left the piratical-sounding nonsense I had heard, previously, from the various members of the Plague Dog band sounding like play acting – as indeed, in some sense, it was. It was a moment before I worked out why that might be:

It was not that this voice actually meant what it said – quite the reverse.

When the Plague Dogs used pirate-sounding nonsense, I gathered, it was to give the listener a clue as to what to expect, that certain forms of conduct would be followed. We're going to board you, be disrespectful to your women, relieve you of your portables, probably hold you for ransom – but if you play the game then nobody will actually be hurt.

Rather like the myth of an Italian kidnapping back on Earth – as opposed to the squalid reality of chaos, murder and dismemberment when a real-life kidnapping goes wrong.

(I hasten to remind you, of course, that a fundamentally decent soul like myself finds all varieties of crime repugnant, no matter what so-called 'formalities' might be involved in the pursuance of it.)

This voice was using the same words, but you could tell that it meant something completely different. Far from using the formalised words as assurance, it was using them as a kind of bait, just as the derelict hulk of the passenger liner had been. It was using them to

hide the murderous sting underneath.

'*Stand by to be boarded*,' it repeated. '*You are now prisoners and bounded by the Clan of the Elevated Star Goat.*'

The Elevated Star Goat, I thought. That was, of course, another way of saying the word 'shoggoth'. It was something of a coincidence that, though it seemed like half a lifetime, it had been only a matter of days since I had been hidden inside – together with people who had absolutely no connection whatsoever with the Plague Dog band – in just a simulacrum of that same thing. With the possible exception of the jumping.

It was a coincidence that I did not have time to dwell on, however, because I turned to realise that Captain Barney was now pale and trembling with outright fright.

'The Jumping Shoggoths…' he breathed, so far as one can breathe through involuntarily chattering teeth.

'The *Jumping Shoggoths*?' I inquired. The obvious depth of his fear had me realising that, even on top of the disquiet I was feeling myself, things might, be even worse.

'The Clan of the Elevated Star Goat,' he chattered. 'We call them the Jumping Shogoths – and they're a bunch of *wankers*…'

I am simply reporting the most unconscionable use of language by others, you understand. Even though, and even though it pains me to admit that I know what such unconscionable language means in vulgar parlance, I ascertained that there was a deeper meaning in the manner that Captain Barney used it.

'I sense there is a deeper meaning in your use of such unconscionable language – the sort of language, incidentally, that would never in any normal circumstances pass my lips,' I said.

'You don't understand,' Captain Barney said, pulling himself together somewhat in the force of my insistence. 'A well-brought-up gentleman like yourself could never understand – even with the perspicacity that allows you to see the hidden depths of the unconscionably crude word I say. I can but only give you the gist of it…'

'So give me the gist of it, Barney,' I said, as plasma-bolt discharges rattled around the frame of the *Black Pig*.

'There was these fellers, see,' said Captain Barney, 'back in the old days. They did this thing, like, when you're young and feel miserable all the time, but they was so stupid that they didn't realise everyone felt that way and so they thought it made them special. Better than.

'They dressed up in black and moped around and kept, like, banging on about how the world would be a better place if they did it a favour and committed suicide. If only they had…

'They was the sort of people who thought the idea of vampires – for

but one example – was cool in itself, instead of a metaphor you could have fun with. The sort of people who never grew up enough to acquire a taste for proper drink, so they went from fizzy pop to cider and then to Chardonnay. They thought that nihilism was an actual thing instead of simply how the world works and something to deal with. They latched on to ideas of vast black horror that some guy invented off the top of his head…

'Gothicks, or some such, I believe they were called – and they were a bunch of wankers. Everybody called them a bunch of wankers, over and over again, pointing out all the various ways in which they were wankers for years on end. And the years turned into centuries. And in the end they were driven out by all these people calling them wankers – out to the edge of inhabited space. And on the edge of space they went mad…

'Now they roam the galaxy in their Love Crafts. Their only mission in life is to bring the wanking back home – and believe me, you don't want to be home when they do.'

'So, am I right in assuming,' I said, 'that these are not the kind of fellows with which we should be associating in any way, shape or form?'

'They'll skin us alive, and poke out our eyes, and cut open our thighs,' said Captain Barney, lost in his own private vision of Hell, if you'll pardon the expression. 'They'll trepan us and cut off our toes and make small pouches out of our…'

'I'll take that as a yes,' I said.

I'd closed and locked the *Black Pig*'s outer hatch on taking my salvage party from the liner. I could only hope that a Plague Dog had not opened it, for some inept reason or another, in the interim. I retracted the maglocks and fired up the thrusters.

I cut in the comms link to the engine room. 'How are the modifications I made, Psycho Jack? Is the retrocrastinator holding up?'

'*She's a'ticking over like clockwork, cap'n*,' came the voice of Psycho Jack Bumfrey. '*Or rather, oscillating fit to bust the band and goin' vorp-vorp-wibblywoo, vorp-vorp-wibblywoo, vorp-vorp-wibblywoo…*'

'Just the stuff.' I ramped up the thrusters as far as I dared without pasting myself, Captain Barney and the rest of the crew against the aft balks. The gravitational forces of acceleration tore at us all the same.

'Do my eyes deceive me,' Captain Barney exclaimed, big bushy beard streaming behind him under the drag, 'or are we heading directly for the highest concentration of Jumping Shoggoth ships?'

'Don't you worry about that, Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo,' I said cheerfully, cutting in the infradrive. 'We'll never get there.'

The infradrive cycled up, blipping us out of regular space – courtesy of the retrocrastinator – just in time.

Chapter Six

It is not a good idea, commonly, for a ship to enter infradrive with another object in the vicinity. It can tend to skew the jump in weird and unexpected ways. The hallucinations this causes to the human mind are various and extreme, entire complex narratives in themselves, whole worlds into which one seems to have been dropped and which one experiences as real… One might find oneself in an illusory Paradise, packed to the gizzards with houris, prana and sherbet.

One might find oneself suddenly transported to a Demon Dimension, the laws of physics in which turned on their heads from what they are commonly held to be, engaged in a dark act of worship to some cruelly rapacious – if remarkably pulchritudinous – Demon Queen, without the slightest idea of who she is or what the ritual motions actually mean.

One may find onself in some dream-world, which appears to make perfect sense at the time, involved in an absurdist detective case involving a man whose sense of smell has been stolen, a bunch of carrots and a small Aylesbury duck. None of these hallucinations mean or affect anything, but they can, apparently, be quite interesting in the manner of a rollercoaster ride – offering valuable psychological insights and opening vistas onto whole new worlds of possibility.

All in all, then, it's a bit of a pity that one comes out of infradrive without remembering a single thing about them.

We blipped back into regular space/time not exactly in the best state of repair. The condition of the *Black Pig* had not really been up to the stresses of infradrive – particularly infradrive cut in on a moment's notice.

If the Pointlessly Exploding Console units had not been removed, they would, in all probability, have pointlessly exploded.

'How's the retrocrastinator?' I asked Psycho Jack Bumfrey over the intercom.

'*She's a'goin zork-zork-clonk, zork-zork-clonk*,' came the voice of Psycho Jack. '*You want I should hit it with a spanner?*'

'Leave it be,' I told him. 'I'll have a look at it when I find the time. Are the engines operational?'

'*Just barely to give us one over lightspeed, I reckon.*'

'That'll have to do.'

'Begging your pardon,' said Captain Barney, with somewhat uncharacteristic humility, I thought, tut if I know the Clan of the Elevated Star Goat – and gods help me I do – then they'll be

a'following our infradrive trail, with murder and skinning people and poking out eyes in their hearts, as soon as you can say knife.'

'My thoughts exactly,' I said. I set a course at random, purely to get us out of the immediate area. It didn't matter which direction we headed, at this point, since the infradrive could dump us back into space/time anywhere, and we had no idea where we were.

The second order of business was to remedy that. I set the navicomp to scan the visible star field and, if possible, find a node for the GalNet positioning system. The computer was woefully inadequate, and I could have come up with a result faster with a pen and a scrap of paper, but I left it running all the same.

Oh, yes, I could *have come up with a result. It's dead easy to write 'oh, god, we're totally lost,' on a scrap of paper, so there.*

The next order of business was to deal with the still-supine Billy-bob Bosun. 'Take him down to the brig,' I told Captain Barney. Then, as a thought struck me: 'Do we actually have such a thing as a brig?'

'We have secure quarters for any… guests we might pick up on our travels,' Barney the Captain said. 'The hatches lock from the outside.'

He frowned. 'They're very comfortable, in actual fact, better than the crew's quarters, apart from not being able to open the door. Hardly a punishment for turning coward and nearly killing us all.'

'I'm not interested in punishing him,' I said, merciful soul that I am. 'I just want to keep him from running around and nearly killing us all again. Take him down there and lock him in, then come back and man the proximity scanners. We can't keep lame ducking it, we're going to have to find somewhere we can put down for repairs…'

I realised that Captain Barney was looking at me strangely.

'Yes?' I inquired.

'Quite the one for giving the orders, aren't you suddenly?' he said, his face blank and unreadable. 'Seems to me we're gonna have to do something about that.'

He pushed past me and activated the internal comms system.

'Attention all hands,' he barked. 'You'll have no doubt gathered by now that our young Jim has saved our necks – and you'll be no doubt of the opinion that the sun shines out of his fundament. Why, he's just the very feller, you'll be thinking, who should really be in command…

'Well, I've got something to say about that. As of this moment I summarily relinquish all titles and privileges of my command, and transfer them to Captain Jim!'

There were a number of muffled but audible cheers from aft as the crew absorbed and comprehended the news.

As for myself, I have to admit that it was not exactly surprised. My elevation might have been sudden, but given my advantages in life and my skills, there was something about it that seemed entirely

natural.

‘Good man, Mister Barney,’ I said, in the bushy-bearded face of most of the available evidence. ‘Be about your business – but first, there’s one thing I must insist upon. We’ll have no more of this “Jim” nonsense from this moment on. If I’m to assume a position of authority, I’ll assume it honestly and with my own name: Jason Kane.’

‘Right you are, Captain Kane,’ said ex-captain Barney.

And that was how, through absolutely no fault or inclination of my own, I came to be the Captain of the dreaded Plague Dog band.

At least now, I thought, with the ship quite firmly under my command, there was no obstacle to me setting a course straight for the Braxiatel Collection and my dear friend Bernice.

Some hopes.

Chapter Seven

'Sob's the way I be a'lookin at it,' said Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob, 'is that mangy cur though he might be, this Doctor whatever-it-is feller is gonna have to feed us, at some juncture, even if it be some thin slop of gruel such as one wouldn't even give to a wash-wasted, tuppenny slugabucket…'

'Entirely with you, so far, Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob,' I said. 'Do, please, go on.'

'Well, then,' continued Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob. 'With that, d'ye see, he's gonna give us spoons and the whatnot. So what we do, like, is we sequester 'em about our persons. And then we wait until them there robot guards are looking the other way and we dig ourselves out. With our spoons.'

'Marvellous, Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob,' I said, not a little sourly I must admit. 'A fine plan, detailed in all its particularities and with an eye for every eventuality.'

I sighed. 'The problem is, the floor of this compound is made entirely of heat-tempered ferro-rockrete. You couldn't cut it with a plasma torch. And I seriously doubt it would be anything other than impervious to cutlery, be it spoons or any other kind. Anybody else got any ideas?'

And, yes, this is actually going to be leading somewhere, thank you very much. It's like this really clever literary device I thought up. Jump right into things in the middle, then go back and say how you got there, then say how things ended up working out in the end.

Oh, really? Hark at Miss Galaxy famous Author, over there. I do beg your pardon. Ms. So tell me, Ms Galaxy famous Author – how long does it take you to get a book actually done?

I know you are, but what am I? And aren't we there yet?

'I've got an idea,' piped up Billy-bob Bosun, who was only with us because I hadn't liked the idea of him running around on the ship, waiting to repeat his celebrated idea of taking it and running at the first sign of trouble.

'Oh, yes?' I said. 'And what would that be, Billy-bob Bosun?'

'What we do is,' said Billy-bob Bosun, 'we all act really cowardly an' that, sell each other out at the first opportunity, lull our foe into a false sense of security, ye see, and then the last man standing has it away on his toes.'

'Thank you for that contribution, Billy-bob Bosun,' I said. 'Let me make one thing abundantly clear. There will be no selling each other out at the first opportunity on my watch. The first man I see selling everybody out at the first opportunity will be on a charge. Do I make

myself clear?'

And let's gloss over the fact of what I could possibly do to them, in the present circumstances, after they'd been charged, I thought.

My fellow captives, I noticed with a pleasure not unmixed with relief, were looking not a little shamefaced at the tenor of my words.

'Good,' I said. 'Now, any other suggestions?'

Psycho Jack Bumfrey put up a tentative hand.

'Yes, Psycho Jack?' I said.

'Well, what we could do, cap'n,' said Psycho Jack Bumfrey, 'is we all wander around, clutchin' our bellies and the like, puttin' the backs of our hands to out foreheads in a listless manner and sayin' things like, "Ooo, we're all of us right poorly, and as like to faint dead away from the vapours and such for want of something to do and a lack of healthful exercise,"…'

'Go on,' I said, purely out of a mordant fascination as to what Psycho Jack Bumfrey was going to come out with next.

'So, then, like, cap'n, we get the bugger to give us all manner of exercising equipment, including – and this is most important – one of them there vaulting-horse thingies.'

'A vaulting horse, eh?' I said, looking at him.

'A vaulting horse, right enough,' said Psycho Jack.

'Fine,' I said. 'And what do we do, then, with this vaulting horse?'

'Chop it up and turn it into a hang glider,' said Psycho Jack, proudly. 'I got the idea out of one of them old holo-movies. We tie our trousers to it, stretch 'em over the frame, like, and then we all fly off to safety!'

'I've been stuffing a bunch of dirt down my trousers,' piped up the baldheaded and wizened pirate, not knowing the name of whom was turning out to be a positive relief.

'Oh, yes?' I said. 'And how's that going to help?'

'Am I supposed to be helping?' asked a bewildered baldy-headed fellow. 'I just like stuffing dirt down my trousers.'

'You're all quite mad,' I said. Then: 'Listen here men, we are actually in quite a lot of trouble here. We are not sitting here in hope of rescue from the Cavalry, Space Patrol or anybody else. We are not going to get out of this by duping the fat one out of the guards and switching clothes with him.

'We are, in fact, trapped in the ultra-secure, force field shielded compound of the fiendish Doctor Gaylord T. Demento, waiting for him to saw our heads off and incorporate our brain matter – some of us having more of that than others, I might add – into his monstrous horde of Cyclopotronic robots!'

The facts of how we came to find ourselves in such a sorry

circumstance were, initially, prosaic in the extreme, and can be glossed over in a few simple sentences.

With the *Black Pig* falling to pieces around our ears, due to the strains and stresses of an unscheduled infraspace jump, it was imperative, as I believe I've said, that we put down somewhere almost immediately to effect repairs.

The Galactic Positioning System had finally coughed up the information that we were in the Dagellan Cluster – which was bad and somewhat depressing news for me, personally. After all I had been through thus far, since throwing in my lot with the Plague Dog band, I was a third as much farther away from the Braxiatel Collection and my dear love Bernice as when I'd started.

It was fortunate, however, in another sense, in that the Dagellan Cluster contains one of the highest concentrations of human-habitable bodies – from planets to planetoids, moons to moonlets and asteroids – in the galactic spiral arm. So numerous, in fact, that it was easy to come across a body where humans could live without humans actually living on it. Just the ticket, in short, for those who for one reason or another might find it wise to avoid human contact while they repaired their ship.

Thus it was that, after some searching, Mister Barney showed me the readouts on a planetoid he had been investigating by way of the proximity sensors.

'Looks like a prospect,' he said. 'No signs of humanoid life.'

'What, none at all?' I said.

'Well, now,' he said, sucking his beard on his teeth, 'you'll know as well as I do, Captain, being an educated man and such, that a single human being a hermit or the like, purely for the sake of argument – wouldn't show up. The sensors just show no real population.'

'Good enough,' I said.

'Interesting thing,' though, Mister Barney continued, 'is that the sensors also show a high concentration of rare metals in a naturally refined state.'

'That is odd,' I said, frowning. 'That's very odd indeed.'

While having, as I believe I've mentioned, not the slightest knowledge of matters that might be regarded as criminal, I do have the a thorough grounding in the various practicalities involved with living in and travelling through space. A human-habitable and resource-rich planetoid like this should, at the very least, have been laid claim to by one of the interstellar space-mining concerns.

'No ownership markers or warning beacons?' I asked.

'None at all,' said Mister Barney.

'Do we have any alternatives?'

'Nothing as close, or easy, or good,' said Mister Barney. 'Shape we're

in, I doubt we'd make it halfway to the next place even half as good, and that's a fact.'

'We'll have to risk it, then,' I decided. 'Remember, though, Mister Barney, that I have profound misgivings about this. We'll live to regret it, you mark my words.'

'Duly noted, Captain,' said Mister Barney.

From orbit, the sensors had merely shown a concentration of metallic and mineral deposits in a naturally refined state. On the ground, the situation was more than somewhat different.

'Ye gods,' Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob exclaimed, back in piratical persona now that we were off the ship. 'This place, it be nothin' more nor less than a junker's paradise!'

Indeed, the surface of the planetoid seemed to be covered, completely, by the stripped-down hulks of space-faring vessels of all kinds, the components of their various ancillary systems spread out and piled in a confused tangle. For my part, if I had been worried before, this vista now turned my previous worries into a state of positive alarm.

A resource-rich planetoid was one thing – but what Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob had so rightly called a junker's paradise was quite another. In terms of space travel, fully processed and manufactured things were at a premium – space, of course, in the end being effectively nothing at all. What might have been seen as junk on the densely populated planets of the Galactic Core, out here were treasures beyond price.

It was absolutely inconceivable that this treasure would not be protected by whoever was laying claim to it – and almost certainly protected with lethal and ultimate force.

With that in mind, on first seeing it, I had ordered the entire crew to leave the ship, split into a number of parties, and salvage anything they could.

This was not, I have to say, the flatly idiotic order it might first appear. I'd known it was too late for us the moment I saw what we'd landed on. Whatever forces were arrayed against us would have been aware of our presence instantly and were already, there was no doubt, mustering against us.

There would have been no point in leaving people on the ship, because that would simply mean they'd be killed or captured on the ship. Our only hope was to grab as much as we could of what we needed from the junk piles, grab it as fast as we could, and then attempt to get away before the other shoe dropped – and for that we needed every hand possible doing the grabbing.

In any case, however speedily we might have worked, in the end it

did no good. I was pointing out some component for Psycho Jack Bumfrey to retrieve and stow in his sack, when a number of the larger junk piles crashed apart to reveal the hulking segments and blazing face plate eyes of the Cyclopotrons.

I have seen horrors in my time, crawling horrors the sight of which might drive a man of lesser mental acuity and a lesser constitution mad with fear but I have never seen things so horrible, in their own way, as the Cyclopotronic robots of Doctor Gaylord T. Demento. In fact, I've seen some men driven mad by even so much as a vague and general discription.

You can therefore count yourself rather more lucky than otherwise that I do not propose to describe them here.[8]

8 The funny thing is, since in the end you only have my word for any of this, you'll just have to take my word for the fact that this particular aspect of matters is really, actually and totally true. Honestly. Would I lie to you?

* * *

'So,' said Doctor Gaylord T. Demento, 'how was it that you managed to discover my fiendish plan of sending out a monstrous horde of Cyclopotronic robots to kick the crap out of this entire galactic Sector? Have you been spying on me? Doctor Gaylord T. Demento has no love for spies…'

Although, thankfully, far less horrific and a great deal more describable than the indescribable horrors of his Cyclopotronic robots, Doctor Gaylord T. Demento was everything one might imagine from a man of that name, not to mention his tendency to refer to himself in the third person.

Bald-headed, obviously. Dressed in a shiny black greatcoat, but of course. One side of his face was covered with a big, scorched, puckered scar – and what at first seemed to be a monocle but in fact, on closer inspection, turned out to be an arrangement of lenses, similar to those of a telescope, was jammed into one of his eye sockets.

Strangely enough, the lens arrangement had not been jammed into the scarred side of his face. The eye in that side seemed perfectly intact, despite the injury to the flesh surrounding it – and incongruously mild-looking and kindly. His words, however, as he addressed myself and the other Plague Dogs, all held pinioned by the beryllium claws of his Cyclopotronic robots, were far less so. Their tone was cold and calmly vicious.

'How did you learn of my plans?' he said, coldly and viciously. 'How did you learn the plans of Doctor Gaylord T. Demento?'

'We didn't learn anything,' I said, meeting his gaze. 'We simply landed here, purely at random, in an attempt to effect repairs to our

ship.'

'I see by your bearing that you are telling the truth,' said Doctor Gaylord T. Demento. 'In fact, by way of this special arrangement of lenses jammed into my eye socket, I can ascertain that it is almost impossible for a fundamentally honest man like yourself to lie. It was your noble and manly bearing, I'm afraid, that had me assuming you were one of those heroic individuals who are, quite tiresomely, forever attempting to disrupt my work.'

He sighed. 'I probably should have left you alone, let you scavenge such leavings as I no longer need and let you go on your way. That's by the by, now, of course. Now you know of my existence, I can never let you leave here… alive.'

Doctor Gaylord T. Demento grinned with demonic coldness. 'Never fear, however. I'm sure I can find a use for you. Parts of you, at least.'

And that was how we found ourselves trapped in the ultra-secure, force field-shielded prison compound of the fiendish Doctor Gaylord T. Demento, waiting for him to saw our heads off and incorporate our brain matter into his monstrous horde of Cyclopotronic automata. The compound was utterly impregnable. There was no way out.

And, no, I haven't just dictated myself into a corner. The very idea. I wouldn't be where I am today if I went around dictating myself into corners all the time, now would I?

Well, all right, maybe not today in particular.

There was no way out, as I say… except that maybe, just perhaps, there was.

Told you.

Supposedly 'impregnable' holding fields sometimes have a 'sweet spot', a point where the electrogravmetric forces interact with one another in such a way that, from the right angle, at the right velocity, it is markedly more easy for a body to pass through than anywhere else.

I scanned the field emitters ringing the prison compound, taxing my admittedly quite extensive – mental resources to their very limit, trying to work out where that weak point might be. Then, without preamble – I launched myself towards the holding field with every iota of bodily strength at my command.

The pain was immense – indescribably immense, as indescribable as one of the Cyclopotronic robots of Doctor Gaylord T. Demento. I'll admit, even, that a small whimper escaped my lips as sheerest agony shook by frame. But then – wonder of wonders – I was through.

"Ere!' Came the voice of Billy-bob Bosun from the prison compound behind me. 'You said no selling everyone else out and having it away on our toes!'

Such a gross misinterpretation of my actions was nothing more than I expected from the likes of Billy-bob Bosun. I did not have time to disabuse him of it, however, for at that moment the only thing – the only truly important thing – was to evade the several Cyclopotronic robots of Doctor Gaylord T. Demento, who were even now being alerted to my desperate escape, and make it back to the *Black Pig*.

Because of a certain piece of information which, what with one thing and another, I've completely forgotten to mention anything about. And which has nothing whatsoever to do with me pulling something totally out of my arse in the slightest.

Chapter Eight

A small while after dropping out of infradrive, a little while after I assumed the captaincy of the *Black Pig*, we received a distress call.

'A distress call, eh?' I said, feeling somewhat relieved.

Rather like the fact of a ship being left derelict, receiving a distress call from a ship made it more or less right and proper to go aboard. It put off the time, again, when the Plague Dogs might be expecting to board a ship and slaughter everybody on it – or at the very least threaten to do so. I still had not made up my mind as to what I was going to do when that eventuality presented itself.

Another, vaguely related, thought struck. 'I don't suppose it could be another trap, do you think? Something similar to the Clan of the Elevated Star Goat?'

'I… don't think so,' said ex-captain Barney.

He had been operating the comms system while I had busied myself with the astronavigational controls, listening for radio traffic by way of a pair of battered and antiquated headphones.

Now he pulled the jack plug from its socket in the comms console… and I realised that my potential problems with the proclivities of the Plague Dog band had only just begun.

'*Help!*' came the distress signal. '*Oh, help! Is there nobody out there who can help a poor and simple five-piece girl band in distress…?*'

Bloody what? What am I bloody supposed to have done wrong now?

I don't know, there's just no pleasing some people…

I manoeuvred the *Black Pig* in to maglock it against the hull of the ship from which the distress signal had come. The process was almost exactly similar to that with the derelict passenger liner, the one which had served as bait for the Clan of the Elevated Star Goat's trap, save that this ship was slightly smaller a fast transporter – than the *Black Pig* herself.

Another similarity was that the life pods were missing, which was something of a puzzle. If everybody was gone then why bother with a distress signal, which would only draw attention away from the signal of the pods themselves? Alternatively – why would everybody else go, but leave a perfectly good five-piece girl band behind.

We were to find out, to our cost, the answer to that latter question a short while later.

For the moment, I walked through the umbilical-connected access hatches to find myself in quite confined but expensively stylish and sumptuous surroundings. I did not have the time to fully take them in, however, because I found myself suddenly surrounded by a number –

the number being five, naturally – of excitedly chattering young ladies, each of a different yet charming complexion, each of a similarly lissom frame – and all of them in what seemed, to me, to be a most improprietous and shocking state of half-dress.

(As I may have mentioned before, while certainly not being immune to the charms of the female form, I am a naturally chaste and temperate soul who believes that there is such a thing as decorum.)

Excited as they were by their liberation from distress, it was some little while before the five girls calmed down to speak coherently:

'I'm Loni,' said one.

'I'm Shawna,' said another.

'I'm Jinx,' said a third.

'I'm Poodles,' said the next.

'And I'm Biz,' said the last.

'And together we are the Glitta Bitches!' they all concluded together.

'Pleased to make your acquaintance,' I said politely. 'For the first time ever in my life, incidentally. Tell me, how did a group of lovely young ladies such as yourselves come to find yourself in dire straits such as these?'

'Well, we were flying along,' said Loni, or it might have been Biz, the one in the skin-tight silver jump suit with the ultra-low-cut décolletage, anyway, 'heading for like this really big show on Squaxabobulus Prime, when all the bleepy things on the ship went glonk-glonk-grark and exploded…'

'Yeah,' said Shawna, or it might have been Poodles, the one in the perky little polypropylene basque, high heels and stockings and suspenders, anyway. 'All the crew went off in their escape-pod things, but they told us there was no room for us, and it was too dangerous anyway, and they promised they'd send someone to help…' and that was simply days and days ago,' said Jinx. 'Did they send you? Have you come to rescue us?'

'The very same,' I said, opting for reassurance – even though the utterance of any kind of untruth at all, however technically it might be untrue, was like choking upon bitter ashes in my mouth. 'Believe me when I tell you that your troubles, ladies, from this point on, are over.'

I could but only hope that this would turn out to be true.

'I'm a bad man, cap'n,' said Billy-bob Bosun. 'I like as tried to cut an' run when the chips were down, no matter how it might have hurt my comrades. I deserve to be punished. I deserve to stay locked up in here and have the key thrown away.'

'Less of that, Billy-bob Bosun,' I snapped. 'Get out of here now!'

‘Oh, *please* let me stay locked up in here and have the key thrown away!’ pleaded Billy-bob, eyeing Loni, Shawna, Jinx, Poodles and Biz, who together were the Glitta Bitches, as though said eyes were about to pop out of their sockets.

‘Billy-bob Bosun,’ I said deliberately. ‘I am not a violent man, but if you do not sling your hook this very instant I shall give you such a drubbing as you will never forget!’

Billy-bob Bosun slunk away. Presently, muffled by bulkhead plating, I heard his voice: ‘Hey, guys! The skipper’s got some girls back there!’

I sighed. I had thus far, with the help of Mister Barney, contrived to keep the existence of our visitors from the rest of the crew.

‘I suggest, ladies,’ I said to Loni, Shawna, Jinx, Poodles and Biz, who together were the Glitta Bitches, that you close the hatch and lock it.’

I had already ascertained that the ‘guest’ quarters of the *Black Pig* could be locked, independently, from either side. This in fact said something about the general character and demeanour of the Plague Dogs – and I preferred to assume, charitable soul that I am, that it meant the other than them being simply and innately inept.

I walked from the ‘guest’ quarters and the hatch closed behind me. In the gangway, a number of Black Dog crewmen had materialised as if by magic.

‘Hear you’ve got some girls in there,’ said one, who shall remain nameless. ‘I like girls, me, hur, hur, hur.’

‘Yeah,’ said another one. ‘Girls is nice.’

‘Now you listen to me,’ I growled. ‘These young ladies are under my protection – and I’m here to tell you, I intend to use every last scrap of it, if needs be. The first time I catch you – any of you – being disrespectful to a lady, I’ll give all you the trouncing of your lives and no two ways about it! Do I make myself clear?

It appeared that I had. The crewmen dematerialised again, in a somewhat surly manner, as though they had been meaning to go about their business anyway. It would only be much later, of course, that I would realise how prescient my words had in actual fact been.

For a short while, things carried on smoothly. Our young visitors remained locked, from their side, in their quarters and I posted a brace of guards to deter any crewman who might wander speculatively past with an oxyacetylene torch – Arlo ‘Confirmed Bachelor’ Bandersnatch and Jethro Squinty, after pointing out to him quite firmly that the young ladies had not come aboard with any moles secreted about their persons. Moles of the sort that might be of interest to Jethro ‘Molestrangler’ Squinty, at least.

All, as I say, went smoothly for a short while – and then disaster, of a kind, struck.

I was in the engine room, attempting to repair the retrocrastinator, when a great shudder ran through the ship. Several engine subsystems exploded in a shower of sparks, just as if they had been Pointlessly Exploding Consoles.

'*Ultrasonic shockwave!*' barked the Tannoy voice of Mister Barney over the intercom from the bridge. '*The epicentre seems to be… looks like it's coming from… the guest quarters!*'

I pelted forwards to the guest-quarter hatch. Bandersnatch and Squinty were there, doubled over, hands clutched to their heads.

'Oh, sir, the sounds!' wailed Jethro 'Molestrangler' Squinty. 'It was like sirens! Shrieking fit to bust the eardrums!'

'Hold hard there, Squinty,' I commanded. 'Let's see what all this is about…'

'Pardon?' said Jethro 'Molestrangler' Squinty.

I hammered on the guest-quarters hatch. 'Ladies? It's me, Jason Kane. Are you all right in there?'

Sounds of the hatch being unlocked, and then it opened.

I stepped inside to find Loni, Shawna, Jinx, Poodles and Biz, who together were the Glitta Bitches, simply standing there. It might have been my imagination, but it seemed to me that their various costumes had swapped themselves around, from girl to girl. Not out of any sense, I hasten to add, that they had been removed and then hurriedly put on in any dubious or salacious manner – but that they were, in some strange sense, completely interchangeable.

'Is everything all right, Mister Kane?' asked Loni, or possibly Poodles, the one in the hunting pinks and with moleskin jodhpurs that I was definitely going to have to keep Jethro Squinty from catching sight of, anyway. 'Is everything all right?'

'If it's not an indelicate question,' I asked, 'what was it you were doing in here just now?'

'Oh, we were just practising,' said Shawna, or possibly Biz, the one in the showgirl outfit with the ten-foot-wide crest of peacock feathers, anyway. 'For like, you know, the really big show on Squaxabobulus Prime, when you drop us off. We still can't get the vocal implants working quite right.'

'Implants?' I said, with a brightly horrible dawning of suspicion.

'Yeah,' said Jinx. 'The Squaxabobulans, right, they sort of don't hear things the same way the rest of us do. So Damian – he's our manager, right – had us go to get these vocal implants put in.' She frowned endearingly. 'Micromodulated pulse-pump high-frequency ultrablasts, or something, he said.'

You're way ahead of me, aren't you. I know that look. And yes, actually – I do happen to think I can get away with it in a million years, so there.

'Do you know,' Biz, or possibly Shawna, chipped in brightly, 'it's a

funny thing, but the last time we all practised together, that was just exactly when our transport ship went wrong. It's, like, really weird, isn't it?'

After impressing upon Loni, Shawna, Jinx, Poodles and Biz, who together were the Glitta Bitches, that it was probably not a good idea to practise together for the immediate future, I assessed the damage they had inadvertently done to the *Black Pig* by way of ultrasonic five-point harmony.

Several key subsystems had been completely burnt out – but worse than that, the structural integrity of the ship itself had been compromised. It would be a matter of hours, if that, before it catastrophically collapsed. It had gone from a question of stopping for repairs as soon as possible, to ditching on the nearest available body right now.

Thus it was, with the *Black Pig* literally falling apart around our ears, we had made our landing on the junkyard planetoid of Doctor Gaylord T. Demento…

Chapter Nine

And that was why, with the indescribably vile Cyclopotronic robots of Doctor Gaylord T. Demento at my heels, I was scrambling desperately through the scattered junk back to the ship.

With a heroic leap, I made it through the hatch just in time. Cyclopotronic Death Ray beams seared into the hull behind me. It would only be a matter of seconds before they burst through.

On first seeing the unspeakable horrors of the Cyclopotronic robots, and learning that a large constituent of their operational systems consisted of living brain matter…

Look, the guy did it of okay? What do you think he said to us after all that gloaty stuff about 'making use of parts of us' and before sticking us in the prison compound? We don't need to hear every bloody word of him banging on about it, do we?

Suit yourself. I don't think it adds anything, it's me doing it and what I say goes. It's not like any of it even happened in the first place, after all.

When I'd learnt that their systems depended on living brain matter, the first thing that had crossed my mind was to regret that the Plague Dog band were completely and utterly different people from the friends I'd left – it seemed like half a lifetime ago – back on Praxis IV, and there was no relationship between them whatsoever.

It would have been really useful, I'd thought, if there could have been some way to have my friend Mira and her psionic talents still hanging around and make it in any way believable.

Now, with the presence of Loni, Shawna, Jinx, Poodles and Biz, who together were the Glitta Bitches, I had the possibility of receiving the desired effect – or a reasonably similar simulation thereof.

I hammered on the guest quarters hatch. 'It's me, Jason Kane!'

On first landing, and realising the potential danger we were all in, I had told the girls to hide themselves away, keep very quiet and not open the hatch for anything.

Then I had remembered to add 'except me', not in the end being quite so stupid as all that.

The hatch opened, and Loni, Shawna, Jinx, Poodles and Biz, who together were the Glitta Bitches, stuck their heads out in a kind of stacked arrangement, one on top of another, that had one wondering what the actual position of their bodies might be beyond the hatch.

'What is it?' asked Loni, or possibly Biz.

'I need you to sing,' I told them.

'But you told us we mustn't,' said Shawna, or possibly Jinx, wrinkling her brow in puzzlement and, incidentally, a manner that was almost too cute for words.

‘No time to explain!’ I cried, for it was at this precise moment that a contingent of the dreaded Cycloptotronic robots of Doctor Gaylord T. Demento had made it aboard and were even now clanking down the gangway. ‘Sing, my pretty ones! Sing as though your very hearts might burst!’

One of the inconveniences of being so preternaturally modest as myself is that I sometimes find myself baulking at describing a resounding victory in which I’ve played a substantial part.

Suffice it to say, Loni, Shawna, Jinx, Poodles and Biz, who together were the Glitta Bitches, came through like little troupers – or indeed, troopers.

They advanced on the Cycloptotronic robots of Doctor Gaylord T. Demento, singing as they went. The cyborgs juddered and spasmed, heads exploding in showers of sparks… and slightly damper showers of purloined cerebral grey matter.

Out of the *Black Pig* they went, out across the landscape of scattered junk, laying waste to cyborganic quasi-life as they went. I couldn’t in all honesty tell you what songs they sang – the so-called music of the youth of today, with their pompadours and motor scooters and complicated beat combos, being a closed songbook to me, but they certainly set my feet tapping.

This was an unfortunate side effect of the ultrasonics, of course. It wore off a few hours later.

Of particular interest were the dance routines, which – were the very idea of such a thing not quite immoral – would have had me falling in love with Loni, Shawna, Jinx, Poodles and Biz, who together were the Glitta Bitches, several times over on the spot.

Benny… you know that in real life there’s absolutely nothing between Loni, Shawna, Jinx, Poodles, Biz and me. What do you mean that’s precisely what you’re afraid oft We just keep coming across each other occasionally -

What do you mean that’s precisely what you’re afraid of, too…?

Anyhow. I had a particularly good view of the dance routines since I was bringing up the rear…

Look, if you’re not gonna stop it then you can go and sit in the corner. God. Some people just have a one-track mind.

And there was nothing I could possibly do to the Cycloptotronic robots that the Glitta Bitches weren’t doing to devastating effect.

At length, we came to the force-shielded prison compound containing the Plague Dog band and, beyond it, the little pup tent where Doctor Gaylord T. Demento lived his simple and ascetic life when not constructing Cycloptronic robots as part of his plans to kick the living crap out of the entire galactic Sector.

He had taken the Glitta Bitch-induced disruption of his plans hard. He sat there on the dirt floor, snuffling into a more than somewhat soiled handkerchief, tears leaking from his intact eye.

'You rotters,' he blubbed, a broken man. 'I'll come back, you see if I don't, and then the entire galactic Sector shall get the damn good kicking it so richly deserves. The Verdax Institute for Applied Cybernetics and Meddling in That which Man was Never Meant to Know will regret denying me tenure – for I am Doctor Gaylord T. Demento!'

He blew his nose with a parp.

Every instinct in my body cried out to administer summary justice to the fiend, but since I was not a duly appointed officer of the law – and especially, given the company I had been keeping of late – it was really not my place. I made a note, however, to inform the authorities at the earliest possible convenience.

Leaving Doctor Gaylord T. Demento to his own devices, we repaired to the prison compound and freed the Plague Dogs – courtesy of the Glitta Bitches blowing out the holding-field emitters by way of a multiple high C.

I have to confess to a momentary pang of worry, incidentally, as to what the Plague Dogs might do, suddenly released en masse and face to face with five quite stunningly beautiful young women. With the possible exceptions of Arlo 'Confirmed Bachelor' Bandersnatch and Jethro 'Molestrangler' Squinty, of course.

Fortunately, in that respect, Poodles, or possibly Biz, had removed her moleskin jodhpurs and substituted a pair of bright red bikini briefs.

The Plague Dogs, however, seemed thoughtful rather than otherwise. Quite possibly it was the effect of seeing what Loni, Shawna, Jinx, Poodles and Biz, who together were the Glitta Bitches, could do in the matter of blowing the heads off things.

'Good to see you, cap'n,' said Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob Hullabaloo. 'I knowed ye'd never run out on us like a scurvy whelp, like.'

'Yeah,' said Billy-bob Bosun. 'That's just what I said, too.'

A day was spent repairing the *Black Pig* with components from the junk piles, patching her up well enough and for long enough to lift off and make the trip to Squaxabobulus Prime.

There, thanks in large part to a payment from the Glitta Bitches' manager, in gratitude for retrieving them from their stricken fast transporter, the *Black Pig* underwent a somewhat more extensive overhaul and refit.

Out in space again, in a ship I judged was now in better shape than

she had been in years, I again began to plot a course that might take us in the direction of the Braxiatel Collection and my dear friend Benny. This time, just maybe, it would work…

Some, as I believe I've said before, hopes.

* * *

A series of vacuum-soundless explosions – and a large number of ships dropped out of infradrive into our piece of sky. Horribly familiar, insectoid-looking ships.

'It's the Clan of the Elevated Star Goat again,' I said dispiritedly to Mister Barney, firing up the *Black Pig*'s own infradrive. 'They've found us again. Gods only know where we're going to end up this time…'

Chapter Ten

‘Many and varied were our subsequent adventures and travails aboard the good ship *Black Pig*,’ I said. ‘I could tell you of the horrors we endured among the big-footed goblin men of Robloglignan. Or the fate that almost befell us in the Citadel of Ringing Trees…

‘I could tell you of the strange affair of the man in a hat that was precisely the right size – and such a strange affair it was. Believe you me, I do not speak lightly when I speak of its unspeakable strangeness.

‘I could tell you tales of how I extricated ourselves from the Malodorous Ghoulies of Zom, how we fell afoul of an individual by the name of Quirlamon Jones and his Lethal Menagerie of Taffeta Marionettes, or how through various improbable circumstances we found ourselves as guests of honour at the multiplexial marriage of the Domina of the Hidden Hand and 37,000 of her second cousins twice removed… but I fear the hour is growing late.

‘We’re landing soon.

‘Suffice it to say, and to cut a long story short, without beating around the bushes or, in brief, indulging in the slightest degree of shilly-shallying whatsoever, we at last came to put down on the moonlet owned by your good self. There, I very much regret to say, the Plague Dog band reverted quite unconscionably to type at the sight of your splendid young daughter here. I was forced – a quite remarkably easy decision, I’ll admit – to turn against my fellows and effect her timely rescue. And there you have it; the rest you know.’

I glanced around to see how my audience had taken my tale.

Shamanthra, naturally, was looking at me with pure and wide-eyed, innocent hero worship. Her dainty hand had been in the habit of creeping onto mine, when I was not standing or moving around to give pantomimic acuity to my narrative, and it rested there now.

Lady Trolltrundler was gazing at me with gratitude, for the return of her daughter intact, well more or less intact – but I fancied that I also detected a faint note of speculation in her eyes, of the sort that, for some reason, I seem to inspire in married women of a certain age and type.

Lord Trolltrundler, on the other hand, was sucking on his meerschaum and giving me a look I knew all too very well.

He was trying to decide if I was (a) the biggest and most bare-faced liar he had seen since the last time he’d looked in a mirror, (b) clinically and utterly deluded enough to think I could possibly even begin to get away with it, or (c) playing a private and somewhat idiotic game entirely for my own amusement.

‘Little bit from each column,’ I muttered to myself.

‘I’m sorry?’ Lord Trolltrundler asked. ‘What was that you said?’

‘Nothing, nothing.’ I patted Shamanthra’s pale and delicate hand in a companionably chaste fashion.

‘Well, Mr Kane,’ said Lord Trolltrundler, gruffly, ‘it appears that we are greatly in your debt for the safe return of our daughter. We owe you something at the very least.’

‘Honesty and virtue,’ I said, honestly and virtuously, ‘are entirely their own reward.’

‘Be that as it may,’ Lord Trolltrundler said. ‘Reparations of some nature are in order.’ He glanced at his wife and daughter. ‘There’s no sense in boring the womenfolk with matters of business. I suggest you come with me to my study, where we can discuss such matters with an appropriate degree of privacy. I, for one, would not be able to rest easy if you didn’t get everything that was coming to you.’

The term ‘Lord Trolltrundler’s study’ might have suggested oak panelling, antique roll-top desks, a wall lined with leather-bound books – the sort of place, basically, you’d expect to find a body with a silver ice pick through the neck.

In fact, it was nothing more remarkable than a spare and minimalist office space, one wall taken up by a big screen window which offered an imposing view of the Trolltrundler Estate and the rows of plexiglass slunk tanks on which his fortune was based. (If you don’t know what a slunk is, then you can count yourself lucky. Alternatively, you could go and read some William S. Burroughs.)

Trolltrundler sat himself on a sleek and splendid, slunk-leather-bound executive chair behind the desk, and I was seated on a decidedly less comfy chair, directly facing the glare from the window. Classic power play stuff.

The desk was simply an oblong slab of shiny black polymer, bare except for a wafer-thin datapad with the apparent simplicity of design that costs an absolute fortune.

Trolltrundler picked up the pad and scanned the content. I made a positive point of not craning my neck to catch anything of what he might be reading.

At length, he put the pad down, positioning it with some deliberation so that its sides were exactly parallel to the edges of the desk, and regarded me impassively.

I realised why William S. Burroughs had been on my mind – Trolltrundler’s eyes held something of that same flat, dead, liquid-nitrogen coldness.

‘A report from my own security staff,’ he explained, reptile flicking his eyes down briefly to the pad. ‘Sector Security Service registers

have no criminal records in your name. Interestingly enough, in fact, they make an active point of saying "has no involvement with anything so much as approaching criminality whatsoever"…'

'I'm glad to hear it,' I said.

'As am I,' Trolltrundler said. 'Otherwise I might be speculating on the subject of a possible development in the practice of abduction and holding for ransom. Why go through all the inconvenience and hazard of actually kidnapping a target, after all, when one can simply save them from the threat of such, and then take full advantage of the generosity of a grateful nearest and dearest.'

'You're certainly better informed about criminal practices than me,' I said. 'I wouldn't even know where to start doing something like that. Even my recent and entirely forced association with common criminals has left me innocent of such iniquitous things.'

'Naive, possibly,' Trolltrundler said. 'It might also interest you to know that my staff have managed to obtain a relatively extensive Security Service run down on the so-called Plague Dog band.'

'Oh, really?' I said.

'I have to tell you,' said Trolltrundler, 'that they hardly seem to be the pathetic and amateurish blunderers you describe. A fleet of state-of-the-art warships, strike fighters and support vessels numbering in the hundreds, wielded with scalpel-like precision by a shadowy leader, the identity of whom each and every Plague Dog has sworn to die in shrieking agony rather than reveal…'

'Why those villains!' I exclaimed. 'I can only imagine that Buggering Barnabas Jimmity Jim-bob et al were lying to me most outrageously the whole time, attempting to pass themselves off as the genuine Plague Dogs in the hope that the name would strike terror to my very heart. What a world, eh?' I shrugged at the vicissitudes of such a world. 'Fortunately, of course, it didn't work, since I had never even so much as heard the name of the Plague Dogs before in my life.'

'Hmph.' Trolltrundler appeared to mull this over. Then: 'There is the matter, additionally, of the Plague Dog ship, this Flying Pig of yours…'

'*Black Pig*,' I corrected him.

'If you say so. A ship in such a state as you describe, however, could have contained none of the more sophisticated detection countermeasures that would have allowed it past my private moon's sensors and alerts. And yet there is nothing in the readouts to suggest that such a ship ever so much as existed.'

'It's a puzzle, I'll admit,' I admitted.

'In fact, the only anomalous traffic within a parsec appears to have been a blip originating from a General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-specification, Pulse-pump Canon Class Interstellar Battle

Corvette – which the sensor readouts swear, quite insistently, never so much as made an approach, far less landed.'

'A General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Canon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette?' I said.

Trolltrundler nodded, impassively.

'Can't say I've ever heard the name,' I said. 'I doubt if I could even say General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Canon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette. All I can suggest is that the *Black Pig* was such a basic piece of junk that it somehow slipped under your sophisticated sensor systems. Possibly while they were busy looking for something as powerful as that other ship you mentioned – a ship of which, as I say, I've never heard before in my life.'

I paused in thought, for a moment. Then: 'Surely, though, you have security footage of the events on the beach – there's no two ways about direct footage from a camera looking at something in plain sight.'

'Funnily enough,' said Trolltrundler, 'the security cameras on that particular stretch of beach chose that very time to short out. A totally random and entirely unsuspicious systems glitch, apparently, according to their self-diagnostic routines.'

'Ah,' I said. 'Then it appears that all you have to go on, at this point, is my word as to what transpired. Surely that should be good enough – unless you're telling me that you doubt my veracity?'

'I don't think I'd dare,' Trolltrundler said. 'My daughter – love her dearly though I do – is not the… sharpest skinning knife in the rack, I'll admit. In this, alas, she takes somewhat after my dear wife.'

He sighed.

'It appears that she has taken something of a shine to you – and if I were to go around casting what she would be sure to see as spiteful and unfounded aspersions, I'd never hear the last of it. Another aspect in which she takes after her mother, frankly, is that she has quite a tongue on her.'

'You're telling me,' I said.

'I beg your pardon?' said Trolltrundler.

'Nothing, nothing.'

'And so there only remains,' Trolltrundler said, 'the matter of your reward for delivering my daughter safe and, ahem, intact to the loving bosom of her family.'

I waved a dismissive hand. 'As I believe I've said before, sir, honesty and frank nobility of heart are their own rewards. All I want in life, to be frank, is to at last make my way back to the Braxiatel Collection so that I can be of some small aid and comfort to my dear friend, Bernice.

'Although, of course, after all my weeks and months of travails

among the Plague Dog band, the time of being any help is long since past – even if I should, by some impossible miracle, find some way of making the journey in less than a galactic standard day. Perhaps I can be of some consolation to her when I eventually arrive.

'I shall remain here on Ithica Secondus, for months if necessary, until I am in a position to secure such passage. All I ask of you, in the meantime, is permission for the occasional visit to your daughter, who I'll own holds something of a special place in my heart, even though it is a few scant hours since we first met. I have the feeling I'll be visiting her quite a lot. Incidentally, you're wife's a bit of a corker, too, in a mature sort of way, isn't she?'

'Do you know,' said Lord Trolltrundler, 'I seem to recall that while my fortune was founded on the slunk-processing industry, I have over the years diversified my interests. One of these, I believe, is a small and experimental astrospatial concern…'

He frowned. 'In fact, now I come to think of it, I seem to recall that they are working on the prototype of an interstitial fast-jump capsule. Capable, I'm given to understand, of making the trip across the galactic spiral arm from here to the Braxiatel Collection in the matter of half a day…'

'Really, sir?' I said. 'Is that so? I never had the slightest idea.'

Epilogue

‘And so, anyway, Benny,’ Jason said, switching off the recording cube with his thumb. ‘That was why I turned up a few hours late, and only just in time for the exciting finale. You know how the time can get away from you when you’re talking total bollocks. Are we there yet?’

Bernice regarded him cooly. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘We’re here.’

Parallel Lives (IV)

By Simon Guerrier

The suburban worlds of Thuban all look very alike. The sky is yellow-green for three-quarters of the day, and green-brown to black for the rest. The buildings are all tall and spindly, though the styles vary from district to district. Inside live the lower scions and concubine-families of the great Imperial Lords, who occasionally deign to visit.

Suburbia is also the nearest that outsiders can usually get to the Imperial Court, which spans the innermost planets. Even here, among the lowest ranks and entertainments, aliens are rarely welcome. It is best to keep out of sight, and not to make any trouble.

For an alien who wants to disappear, the suburban worlds of Thuban are almost perfect.

Almost.

'It isn't locked,' whispered Jason, sliding the thin partition of wood to the left. The room beyond was dark, blocky shapes of furniture looming within.

'No,' agreed Bernice. 'That's because Thuban only locks up its prisoners. As I told you at the last door. And the one before that.'

'And some before that,' added Adrian. He wasn't really built for whispering and stealth. His footsteps were loud on the bare, wooden floor as he made his way forward into the dark room.

'Careful, Adrian,' said Jason. He couldn't understand why they were both so testy – he'd been trying to keep the mood light for days. But the more he cracked jokes and told stories, the more he radiated charm and good cheer, the more cross and sulky they got.

His ear piece crackled. 'She's coming back up.' No emotion, no shock, no, 'Get out of there now!' Typical bloody Bev.

'Er, guys,' he said.

'We heard, Jason.' He could barely see Bernice or Adrian now. He'd said they should all have had night-vision goggles. But would anyone listen?

'No traps so far,' said Adrian, from somewhere ahead and to the left.

'Nor here,' said Bernice, somewhere to the right. Christ, thought Jason, she wasn't even cracking pithy one-liners. That really meant things were bad.

'I haven't stumbled into anything eith–' Jason began, before catching his toe on something and lurching forward. He managed to

stop himself falling, managed not to be quite so crap, but he was glad he couldn't see the eyes of his comrades on him.

'Shit,' he said. 'Sorry.'

Somewhere in the darkness, someone giggled. 'Language, Jason.'

'Peter!' cried Bernice, forgetting her own rule about keeping things quiet. Jason struggled to see what was happening…

And the lights clicked on.

Bernice was stood by a small, makeshift bed, her arms wrapped around Peter. The kid looked fine: surprised to be woken so late in the night, delighted to see Mummy, and put out by her tough body armour getting in the way of his hug. Jason grinned at Adrian, but Adrian ignored him, looking first at Benny, and then to whoever had just turned the light on. Jason slowly turned round.

Ms Jones had a pistol trained on him. She looked terrible, even more scary than usual. He guessed she'd not had much sleep, but her face showed old bruises, too – perhaps from the loons at the hotel, like Bev and Adrian had said. And that look in her eyes, a whole new level from what you got losing a library book or being a bit drunk at a meeting…

'Hiyah,' he said, keeping things cheerful and light. Very James Bond.

Ms Jones shot him.

The pain came first, then consciousness. He was lying on his back, and moving wasn't really an option. He tried to sit, and pain flailed through his arms and chest. Focused electrical charge, he reckoned. Does a lot of damage at close range, even in body armour.

Bernice and Adrian were on either side of him, on their knees. Benny had her hands behind her back, and she flapped her wrists, signalling him. Yes, he thought, attention got. Now what d'you expect me to do?

Ms Jones still stood at the door, pointing the gun at them. And in her other arm, she cradled Peter. He looked confused, holding Ms Jones tight while he tried to make sense of it all. And Ms Jones was talking, softly and simply. Jason forced the tinnitus screaming in his head to the background.

Something about bad parenting. Something about Peter having to come first for a change, about no more excuses. Bernice's hands stopped moving. She bowed her head and her shoulders twitched. Jason realised she was weeping.

'No!' he wanted to shout, but couldn't. It wasn't fair, or true. Peter had a mum and two dads who loved him, and it wasn't up to the ruddy babysitter to tell them how to bring up their kid! Where did she get off telling them -

‘You told me once that you saw the monster he’ll become,’ said Ms Jones, looking down fondly at the boy clinging to her.

‘He killed Sophia’s son,’ Bernice said, quietly. ‘He came back from the future, and he killed Sophia’s son.’ Yes, thought Jason, the Grel and the time rings had been involved, but surely they’d sort that out when it happened.

‘I can change that,’ said Ms Jones. ‘Give him a home. A parent who’s not going to spend every other week on the far side of the galaxy, or being attacked by robots, or just leaving him till last. I can bring him up properly.’

‘Maybe you can,’ said Bernice, again her head bowed. Jason wanted to reach for her, to tell her, ‘No!’ He could only let out a breath.

‘Believe me,’ said Ms Jones, ‘the Collection is no place to bring up a child. I’ve seen what’s coming.’

‘That’s why you stole the security plans, is it?’ snarled Adrian.

Ms Jones raised an eyebrow at him. ‘I didn’t –’

‘You’re going to sell us out to the Draconians!’ he said. ‘Whatever you’ve seen in the future, you don’t gamble against your own side!’

‘I didn’t…’ Ms Jones said again. ‘And the Draconians don’t have anything to do with this. Mr Braxiatel knows – ‘She stopped, and a strange smile cut across her face. ‘You’ve found me out,’ she said. ‘You learned my secret.’

‘Coming from the future isn’t everything,’ said Bernice. ‘We know all predictions are off. Look at the Occupation. None of us saw that one coming, least of all Brax.’

Ms Jones’s gazed at her. ‘I wouldn’t be so sure about that,’ she said. Jason, lying there prone, felt a headache coming on.

‘If I did give him back to you, promise me you’ll make more time for him?’ asked Ms Jones. Her voice was different, content. Like she’d finally come to her senses.

‘Yes,’ said Bernice. ‘Please…’

Ms Jones kissed Peter on the forehead. ‘Be a good boy for Mummy,’ she said, and then lowered him down to the ground.

Peter hesitated, looked back at Ms Jones, and then ran towards Bernice. For a glorious moment, it all seemed okay.

Adrian pounced forward, arms reaching out for Ms Jones. He let out a terrible yell.

Ms Jones stepped back, the amazement in her face flushing to horror. She raised her gun.

Bernice bundled Peter up in her arms. Jason saw his face over Bernice’s shoulder, just starting to realise something had gone wrong.

A great pulse of electrical blue tore into Adrian, blasting him back across the room…

And Ms Jones wasn’t there any more.

Bernice was screaming. She wouldn't let Peter go, wouldn't let him see what had happened. Peter struggled in her grip, hurting himself in the process. He started to cry. Adrian struggled to his feet and ran forward, clutching at his smoking sides where Ms Jones had shot him. Jason's head was reeling, trying to make sense of it all – the noise and movement, and why was there blood on the ceiling?

It was a miserable ride back to the Collection. The feeling in Jason's limbs came back to him slowly, in agonising spasms that he had to endure alone. Bev was flying the shuttle. Benny was ensuring Peter was okay. Adrian was keeping between the two women. Jason struggled to his feet again, though unable to feel anything much below his knees. His feet were pink, as if newly scrubbed clean. The hairs on his legs stood on end.

He would have begged for help from someone, from anyone, but the internal comms were all off. Adrian's idea. He wanted everyone separate until they'd cooled down. So they were all in their own little boxes, and Jason on his own when he most needed a hand. So much for their happy family, he thought. Everyone off doing their own things, too busy with their own worries and needs to notice what was happening to each other. Ms Jones was right in some ways – Peter was always being dumped on somebody else. He'd done it himself. He felt wretched. His left knee buckled underneath him, and he couldn't even use his arms to break his fall.

Irving Braxiatel glowered in his high-backed chair, steepling his fingers. He'd held the same position for about twenty minutes. Bev was determined to maintain her own composure. She'd done what she had to.

'So,' he said. 'The charge that hit Jason shorted out your ear pieces.'

'Yes, sir,' said Bev.

'And so you had no idea what was being said in that room.'

'That's right, sir.'

'Hmm. I'd like to have heard what Clarissa made of herself.'

'The others have made statements?'

'Yes… but they don't all add up. I do so hate loose ends.'

'Sir. We didn't find the security schematics, or any clues as to what she had done with them.'

'No,' said Braxiatel. 'But I'm going to assume that whatever she had made it into the hands of our enemies. So we'll come up with something else. Adrian is going to have a new project. Send him in will you.'

She wasn't sure she'd heard that right. 'I'm sorry, sir?'

'Send Adrian in.'

'We're finished, you and me?'

‘Unless you had something else to offer me.’

She regarded him carefully, but his face remained inscrutable. ‘I thought,’ she began. ‘Well, forgive me, sir, but I thought you’d have more to say about what I did.’

‘No,’ he said.

‘I shot Clarissa Jones.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘But you read the situation as best you could, saw your moment, saw her shoot Adrian, saw Peter out of her reach, and you acted as anyone would. As I’d hope anyone would.’

‘It was always going to be me to shoot her,’ she said. ‘If it came to that. The others are Peter’s parents, one way or another, and they wouldn’t… They shouldn’t have…’

‘Beverley,’ said Braxiatel. ‘You took on a difficult responsibility. You made a difficult choice. I am proud of you. Now, if that’s everything?’

It was what she needed to hear. She bobbed her head, stood, and walked calmly from his office.

Adrian was waiting outside. He looked at Bev, then quickly looked away. ‘He’ll see you now,’ she said, not breaking her stride. He stepped out in front of her, blocking her way.

‘Bev,’ he said.

‘I don’t want to discuss it,’ she told him. ‘I did what I did.’

‘You saved me,’ he said. She had never heard his voice like that. He was almost purring. ‘Jason was wearing body armour, and look what it did to him.’

‘Well,’ said Bev, taken aback. She let him take her tiny hand in his. ‘What?’

‘I have to see Brax,’ he said. ‘And then let me take you for lunch.’

Bernice and Peter walked hand-in-hand around the great lake, the centrepiece of the view from the Mansionhouse. In the middle of the lake, young people had lined up their rowing boats, and competed to run across as many bows as possible before prat-falling into the water. Peter watched this game attentively, not finding it funny, trying to puzzle out its rules. Bernice found that strange, disquieting even. At his age, she’d have been clutching her sides.

Hass lumbered over towards them. His cold-suit seethed.

‘They’ll mess up your lilies,’ said Bernice.

‘They’ll repair any damage they do,’ he said. ‘Ms Tarrant says I can have the security footage, see who it is who’s to blame.’

Bernice shivered. The day was getting on, but there was something else in the air. She hated the idea of the kids out on the lake being treated like trespassers. This was their home.

Things were changing, she thought. A death in the family cast new light on those left behind. And maybe Ms Jones was right – they didn’t

all work together as they should. She held on to Peter's hand tight, appalled at the thought that he might feel neglected, unwanted, unloved.

She thought of the poor Atwallan women, segregated from other people, even as they walked amongst them. And Peter, because he was a child, because he needed time and attention, because – damn it, yes – there were other things that seemed more important, more pressing… Peter needed better.

He needed his Mummy around, not jaunting off over everywhere. She would talk to Brax about it, take fewer assignments, make them closer to home.

She gazed down at his beautiful, hairy face and couldn't believe she could ever leave his side.

'We need to talk,' said Hass.

'Do we?' she replied, not really caring. Peter was all that mattered now.

'We do,' said Hass. He looked awkward at the best of times, so it was hard to tell if this was more urgent.

'Okay then,' she said. 'Talk away.'

He folded his arms, the Martian stance for formality. 'I wished to propose a grave site,' he said.

She grinned at him. 'A lot of the garden's already very serious,' she said. 'Can't you let your hair down for a change?'

She thought of Clarissa, who she'd once told that, too.

'You misunderstand me,' Hass said. 'A site for a grave.'

Bernice smiled sadly. 'There won't be one, Hass. Ms Jones didn't want to be here. We found a will. She's going back to some planet in Acteon.' She noted the way his head dipped to the side, took it to mean regret. 'Sorry. I wanted to say goodbye, too.'

Hass nodded, taking this in. 'I apologise,' he said. 'But it wasn't Ms Jones that I meant.'

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